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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

DECEMBER, 1966 Vol. 20, No. 1

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

AN END TO HORROR

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Desperate, trapped, four frightened men band together to seek out and kill their betrayer. And fighting against time, Mike Shayne faces suicidal odds to try to save an innocent man from death.

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AN END TO HORROR

A NEW COMPLETE SHORT NOVEL

by Brett Halliday

Two wars, two continents away, four frightened men planned a murder to save their lives, as Mike Shayne raced against time and bullets to try to rescue an innocent man . . .

MIKE SHAYNE followed the stocky, muscular man across half of Miami. The man drove his small black car carefully, almost fearfully, as if not sure of himself behind the wheel of a car. There was the slow starting, the long, slow stopping at each light, the careful keeping to the right on the heavily traveled highways.

Near the southern edge of the city the small black car turned off the speedway. Shayne eased his car off along the exit ramp as far behind the stocky man's black car as he dared. The black car ahead made a right off the exit ramp, and then a left down a less traveled street. Shayne followed.

They were now in a low-cost tract area—small houses with flat roofs and small windows, but large TV antennas. The black car drove, still carefully, down the quiet streets where children played.

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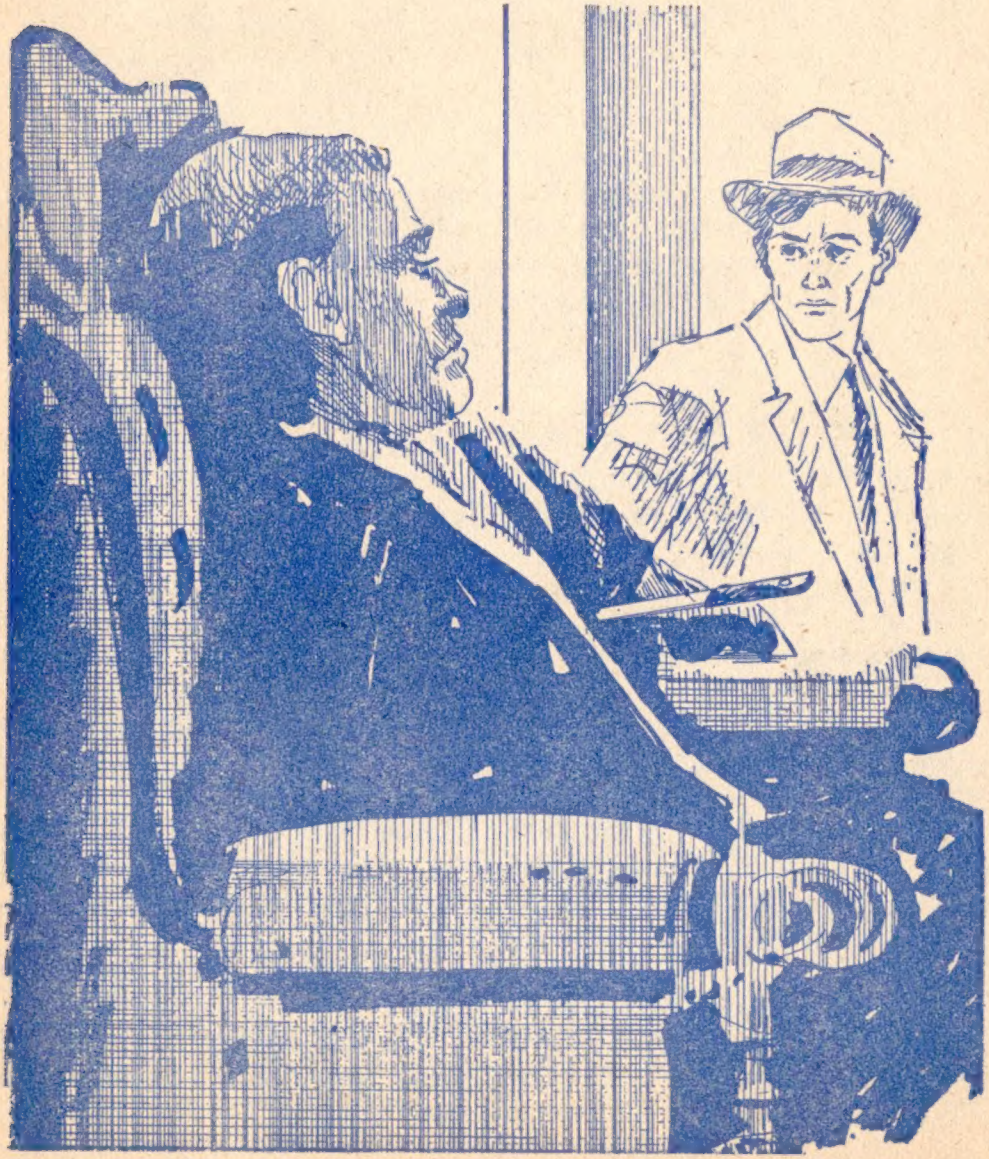
Featuring

MIKE SHAYNE



In his car, Shayne rubbed his ear lightly. It was not exactly the destination he had expected for the stocky man. Blackmailers did not usually live in such a respectable surroundings—if the stocky man were a blackmailer, and if he lived here.

Shayne came out of his reverie—the black car had stopped in front of a tract house a block ahead of Shayne. To be sure he had not been spotted, and to observe the house, Shayne drove on and passed the small black car and the flat-roofed house. The stocky, muscular man was walking from his car up the walk toward the front door of the house.

The stocky man seemed to be making no attempt to conceal his actions. The black car was parked right on the street in front of the house. The house itself was no different from all the other small, pleasant houses in the tract. Its lawn was mowed; flowers and plants grew in profusion all around it.

In his rear-view mirror Shayne watched the stocky man enter the house. He made a U-turn in the quiet street so as not to let the front door of the house out of sight, and parked half a block away. He got out of his car and sauntered along the street.

His grey eyes observed the entire area of the house closely. There was a back yard, but it was enclosed with a high fence. There was only one other door—a side door to the yard.

Satisfied that there were only the two ways out of the house, Shayne returned to his car and drove a few feet closer, to a place from where he could watch both the front door and the door out into the yard. Then he slumped down in his front seat to watch. Slumped as he was the car looked empty, looked exactly like the other parked cars on the street.

Shayne watched until the sun went down in the west. Nothing had happened. The stocky man did not come out. The car did not move; no one else went in or came out. When the sun was gone, Shayne still sat and watched. It was long, slow, tedious work, but that was ninety percent of a detective's job—slow, tedious watching and waiting.

Shayne had one piece of luck—both doors he had to watch were half glass, and the light showed through from inside and outlined the doors in the night.

Anyone going in or out of those doors would be clearly visible to the red-head.

Now that it was dark, Shayne sat up behind the wheel. He lit his tenth cigarette and smoked in the night.

It was nine o'clock when it happened.

The side door of the house suddenly opened and a figure ran out into the night. The door opened so

quickly, and the figure ran so fast, that Mike Shayne did not have a chance.

The big red-head was out of his car and running to the house in seconds, but the shadowy figure had too much start. The shape went across the backyard and over the fence before Shayne reached the house.

Shayne ran into the backyard, but the shadowy running figure was already in the next street. As Shayne reached the fence he heard a motor start in a car, and the car roared away. The big detective turned back. He would not catch the running man. All he could do now was find out why the man had been running.

He found out the moment he went in the back door of the house, went through the kitchen, and entered the small living room.

It was a small but comfortable living room. A lived-in room, with a comfortable couch, a TV set, a small coffee table, three stuffed chairs, and two large bookcases filled with books. But it was something else he stared at.

The comfortable room was also a death room.

The stocky man sat in one of the stuffed chairs. A very bloody chair. The stocky man was dead, knifed cleanly and expertly just under the rib cage, the knife angled upward to the heart. A sure, silent thrust that gave the victim not even the chance of a last sound.

There would have been a gasp—and silence.

Shayne stepped across the silent living room and bent over the body of the man he had followed to this house. He touched the body, but he did not have to. The man's head lolled at an angle of death.

Shayne examined the body. It was fully dressed, not tied or restrained in any way. There was a glass of beer on the table beside the chair, and four empty cans.

Beside another chair facing the body across the room there was another glass and four more cans of beer. The TV set was on, some dramatic show where a man in uniform moved silently through a Hollywood forest.

The room showed no signs of battle or struggle or search. It looked like a room where two men had shared a companionable evening watching television and drinking beer. But the body had been searched. The pockets were turned out, the suit coat pulled open. The pockets were torn, as if the searching had been done hurriedly.

Shayne sat down in one of the other chairs, lit a cigarette, and looked at the body. The big red-head tugged on his left earlobe. His hard grey eyes were thoughtful as they looked at the dead man. One thing he knew—no one had entered the house after the stocky man. Which meant that the shadowy killer had already been in the house!

He scowled and looked around the neat, friendly living room. He had his thick fingers through his shock of red hair. Why? Blackmail, and one victim had decided to pay with murder? If the stocky man had been a blackmailer, it would fit. Men had killed to stop blackmail before this.

A victim having quiet beers with his blackmailer—it had also happened before. And, after killing the blackmailer, the victim searched for whatever documents or other evidence there might be. Only in that case the room should have been searched, the house turned upside down. Unless the killer had found what he wanted in the pockets of the dead man!

Mike Shayne felt uneasy. He did not know it was blackmail. What blackmailer sat for hours drinking beer with his victim—and unarmed? Could it be the other way around? The shadowy killer the real blackmailer, and the stocky man only another victim?

Possible! Yet blackmailers rarely murder—it puts an end to their whole operation. It is hard to get money from a dead man. Of course, even blackmailers get scared. Maybe the stocky man had put up a fight.

Shayne stood up and began to search the house. As he searched, it did not make him feel any better to know that the man had been killed under his nose. Still, a few minutes ago he had had no reason to suspect that he was dealing with possible murder. Or had he?

The young anxious girl had been sure that her father was scared, worried.

He found nothing of interest in the room, beyond the obvious fact that the dead man had lived alone. That the house belonged to the dead man was clear from the clothes in the bedroom closet—they were his exact size—and from two pictures on the bedroom dresser.

The first picture showed the dead man with a woman and a child. There was something odd about the picture, and the man had been much younger in the picture. Shayne could not place what was strange about the picture.

The second picture showed the dead man with three other men. They were all peculiar—thin, grey-faced, wearing clothes that did not fit. They were so thin and staring that Mike Shayne did not place the stocky man at first. He did not know the others, of course, although one of them looked somewhat familiar—the tallest man on the left.

That was all Shayne found, and he went to the telephone to call Will Gentry and the Miami police. After he had made his call, and Lieutenant Frederic Rolf of Homicide had asked him to wait in the house, Shayne decided he was thirsty.

He went into the kitchen and found a cold beer in the refrigera-

tor. Then he returned to the living room to wait for the police.

He started to sit down, and stopped! He went back into the bedroom and looked at the second picture, the one with the four men in it. The tall man! Now he recognized the tall man—it was the girl's father! Very changed, without the beard and with a bandage on his face, but it was the same man the girl had shown him the picture of and said was her father—her father who was in some kind of trouble.

He recalled how nervous the young girl had been.

II

SHE WAS a tall, slender girl of about twenty. She had blonde hair, and a pretty face if you liked long, high-cheekboned faces. She was angry and nervous at the same time. A trick that could bring you to the point of hysteria, unless you were twenty and healthy.

Lucy Hamilton had been solicitous when she ushered the girl in.

"Miss Bauer is worried about her father, Michael," his pert secretary said. Lucy was all but petting the girl like an invalid.

"He's in some trouble, Mr. Shayne," the nervous girl said. "I know he's in trouble. I don't care what he says!"

"Well, that's what I'm here for," Shayne said soothingly.

The girl's voice, nervous and worried as it was, was deep and husky. Strong, yet like heavy velvet. Nervous as she was, her big eyes were firm and steady on Shayne's face. Lucy was protective.

"You just sit down, dear," Lucy said. "Mr. Shayne will help you."

"I'll do my best, Angel," Shayne said, nodding almost imperceptibly to Lucy Hamilton to leave them alone. Lucy took the message. After his brown-eyed secretary had closed the door behind her, Mike Shayne smiled reassuringly at the young Miss Bauer.

"Now, what about this trouble, Miss Bauer?" Shayne said.

The girl, seated across the desk facing the red-head, dabbed at her eyes. Then she shook her head, as if angry with herself. Shayne

watched her. She was a girl who had been taught to be strong, to face the world as it was and accept trouble with equanimity.

"Your father would want you to face whatever it is," Shayne said, making a guess.

The girl seemed startled. "How did you know that, Mr. Shayne?"

Shayne smiled. "A professional trick, Miss Bauer. Elementary deduction, from what I see about you."

The girl nodded. "You're right, of course. Father would be angry if he knew I was here. He always taught me to solve problems on my own."

"A good teaching," Shayne said drily, "but sometimes stupid. We all need help. Suppose you start at the beginning?"

The girl shrugged almost helplessly. "I'm not at all sure I know the beginning. In fact, I have very little to tell, Mr. Shayne."

"All right, just tell what you have."

The girl frowned. "Well, it began about three days ago. This man suddenly appeared at the house. He's been there, off and on, at some time every day since. Father won't even tell me his name. He says it's not important. But they talk a lot, and about a week ago father began to carry a pistol!"

Shayne rubbed his chin. "He bought a pistol?"

"No, I think he had it. It's a Luger, I think, and a week ago he began to carry it with him all the time. The day I first saw it he was cleaning and oiling it. I watched him. He loaded it and checked it. He pointed it at the wall. He seemed to be—well, practicing!"

"He's never carried a pistol before?"

"No, never! And, Mr. Shayne —" The girl hesitated, looked at Shayne. "I've seen him sit with it when he thought I wasn't near. He stares at it and touches it!"

Shayne tugged on his left earlobe. He felt a small chill. He had heard of such men: professional assassins, psychotics. Miss Bauer did not seem like the daughter of an assassin, but—

"Go on," Shayne said.

The girl shook her head. "That's all, Mr. Shayne. This man comes to the house. They go into the study and talk, and my father now carries a gun. That's all, except—"

"Except?" Shayne said. The *excepts* were usually the important parts.

"He's nervous, Mr. Shayne. Very nervous and excited. He's like a caged lion."

"Worried or eager?" Shayne said slowly.

"Well—both, perhaps. Worried, yes, and eager," the girl said.

Shayne continued to tug slowly on his earlobe. He thought about the problem of Miss Bauer. A man had a right to have a gun, if he had a license, and Bauer probably did. Still, he could see where a daughter

would worry if her father suddenly took to carrying, even fondling, a gun, when that sudden change coincided with the appearance of a stranger. Still, it was very little; there could be a hundred innocent explanations.

"Tell me something about your father and yourself. Who could this stranger be? Is there anything in your father's past?"

The girl seemed to shiver. "That's the trouble, Mr. Shayne, I don't know. I don't know who the man is; I don't know much about my father's past."

Shayne frowned. This could be bad. The thought of an assassin came to his mind again—a man with a blank past.

"What about your mother? Can she help?"

The girl shook her head. "No. You see, Mr. Shayne, I know that my father came from Europe. Perhaps twenty years ago. I'm not sure; he never talks about Europe. But I know he came from somewhere over there. Most of his old friends are European. There aren't many. My mother and he were married here. She knows as little about his past as I do."

"Is this stranger a friend?" Shayne asked.

"Not one of his friends that I know. But they know each other, I'm sure of that. Father really has only two old friends: Morris Schreiber and Jacob Andric. The rest of our friends are all American, mostly connected to father's business."

"What business?"

"He's a wholesale jeweler," the girl said.

Shayne narrowed his eyes. "Jeweler? Has he done well?"

"I think so, Mr. Shayne."

"Jewelers often have pistols," Shayne said.

The girl nodded. "I know, but he's never carried it. Not even on his trips to Europe when he carries gems."

"He returns to Europe often?"

"Yes, it's part of his business. Only—"

"Go on," Shayne prompted.

"Well, there have been trips where he wasn't where he said he would be. I mean, he was supposed to be in, say, Amsterdam, but we found him in Vienna. I mean, he would extend his trip and go somewhere else beside Amsterdam. Twice he went to Prague. I know he has no business there."

Shayne tugged harder on his earlobe. "There's nothing else you know about his past?"

"Else? I know nothing, not even what country he comes from. He has an accent, but you couldn't place it. Middle Europe, Mr. Shayne, no more. An educated man from Middle Europe. I don't think he had his beard then. I've seen a picture."

Shayne sat forward. "He has a beard? A beard he grew when he came here?"

"I suppose so. Mother said he always had a beard."

Shayne considered. It had ominous overtones, all the sound of a man leading a double life. Or, equally possible, a man with a past and an old friend turned blackmailer. But then there was the eager excitement, if the girl was right, and that did not really fit either a double life or blackmail.

The return of an old life—that was a possibility. Perhaps the sudden stranger was a friend from the distant past, a welcome old friend. But in that case, what about the Luger? The Luger itself, caressed, could be a memory, a memento. But not loaded, cleaned, prepared.

Prepared for what?

Shayne smiled at the girl. "All right, Miss—what is your first name, young lady?"

"Alicia, Mr. Shayne," Miss Bauer said.

"All right, Alicia, I'll look into it for you. I expect that you don't want your father to know just yet?"

Alicia Bauer paled. "Oh no, Mr. Shayne. I—I have some money I can—"

"Just leave a dollar as retainer," Shayne said. "I'll see if you need me at all. If I think you do, we can talk fee then."

"Thank you, Mr. Shayne," Alicia Bauer said.

After the girl had gone, Mike Shayne tugged on his earlobe. If there was anything going on, he did not think he would have to ask the girl for his money. Her father would probably pay up. Unless, of course, the father was on the wrong side.

It was probably nothing at all. That was what he had thought before he followed the stocky man.

III

WHATEVER else it was, it was now murder.

The weapon had been a knife, but a man who fondled a Luger could have a knife. The job had been neat and expert. Whoever had used the knife on the stocky man had known how to use it.

As he waited for the police, Mike Shayne went over the events of the day since Alicia Bauer had left his office.

With the picture of her father, Manfred Bauer, that the girl had given him, Shayne had gone to work. Manfred Bauer, in the picture, was a tall, bearded man with a distinguished air, formally dressed, about fifty years old or a little more. Shayne had decided to start by trailing the stranger from Bauer's house.

The Bauer house turned out to be a large ranch-style affair in a modest development in a quiet section of Miami. Shayne staked it out and waited, after first checking with Alicia that her father was at home.

The stocky man had arrived in a small, black car and gone in-

side at the time Alicia said he usually came.

He had remained inside with Manfred Bauer for two hours. When the stocky man came out, with Bauer, Shayne had watched him get back into his car and drive off. Mike Shayne followed.

And that was it—the whole day until now.

And now it was murder. A murder committed under Shayne's nose.

Shayne studied the house. It was the small house of a bachelor. The stocky man had apparently lived alone. The signs of a bachelor were everywhere.

The dead man had done little with the house. There were no signs of occupation outside the living room, the kitchen, and one single bedroom.

Everything about the house was transient. Shayne found two suitcases in the bedroom closet. Both had tags and stickers from many cities, hotels and airlines, mostly in Europe. His search over, Mike Shayne sat in the living room. He had a problem.

How much should he tell the police? He had no proof, or even good indications, that Manfred Bauer was actually involved in the death of the stocky man. No, for the moment he would keep his client, and her father, confidential. He did not even know who the dead man was, much less why he had come to Miami.

The police would find the pictures, and from them they might reach Bauer. Until then Shayne would keep quiet.

Lieutenant Fred Rolf was not pleased about this decision. Rolf led his men into the small house. While the experts went to work, Rolf took Shayne aside. The Lieutenant was a special friend of Shayne's. The red-head had encouraged his friend Will Gentry, Miami Chief of Police, to promote Rolf. The tall, thin lieutenant was grateful. But he was a policeman. He did not like Shayne's story.

"You tailed the dead guy, Mike? For who? Why?"

"Why, Fred, was because my client wanted him tailed. No names yet. Okay, Fred?"

"Your client could be a suspect," Rolf said.

"Give me some time. I'll tell as soon as I feel right."

"I'm not sure, Mike. You're hired to make a tail, and the guy is killed. That makes your client prime."

"At least until you find out who the dead man is," Shayne said.

Rolf frowned. "Well, okay, Mike. We'll go to work on the corpse. As long as you're sure your client doesn't know the guy. That's hard to buy, you know?"

"As soon as I have something to tell," Shayne said.

Rolf nodded. "Okay, Mike. I'll carry you a while."

The lieutenant of Homicide turned to his men. They came to

report one by one. The fingerprint man said there were some fine prints on the dead man's beer cans. The prints on the killer's cans were few and smudged.

"But from what I can find, I'd say the smudged prints are the same as the prints on the other beer cans, namely, those of the dead man," the fingerprint man said.

Rolf looked at Shayne. "Meaning our killer held the cans with something. It would have looked pretty silly to sit and drink beer with gloves on all night."

Shayne nodded thoughtfully.

"There are paper napkins on the table," the fingerprint man pointed out helpfully.

"Thanks," Rolf said drily, and said to Shayne, "It also makes it pretty certainly premeditated. Taking all the trouble to be sure of leaving no prints. Of course, the car parked next block pretty well showed that—a getaway all set up."

Shayne rubbed his ear. "I don't know, Fred. Why sit for so long before doing the job? The car could have another explanation."

Rolf nodded a certain agreement. Before he could talk again, two more of his men came to report. They had found nothing much in the house. It looked like the dead man had not lived long in the house, nor very well.

There was no direct identification of any kind, which was more than peculiar. Just the photos to work with.

"No wallet, no papers, and no passport," the detective who was reporting said. "That's funny, Lieutenant, because there's those stickers all over his suitcases. I mean, he traveled. He must of had a passport."

"Maybe it expired."

"Some of the stickers are dated this year."

"So he had a passport," Rolf said. "Did you find anything positive?"

"Well, I don't know," the detective said. He held up a hotel room key. "Found this. It's for The Waverly, a cheap flea joint downtown."

Rolf looked at Shayne. "Two living places? That's pretty suspicious, Mike."

"It is," Shayne agreed—a blackmailer's trick.

The last report came from the medical examiner. The ME wiped his hands and waved to his men to pack the body in the basket. Then he read his notes off to Lieutenant Rolf.

"Dead maybe half an hour, probably less. Death caused by a single knife wound that went in under rib cage, up into the heart." The ME looked up at Rolf. "The work of an expert with a knife; death just about instantaneous. I won't be able to tell you much more, even with the autopsy. Knife was about six inches long, thin and narrow, and very sharp. That's it."

The ME closed his notebook and left with his men following him with the basket. Rolf seemed to stare off after the body with a lot of speculation. Shayne was thinking about a knife expert who had sat drinking beer with his victim.

"The killer looked for something," Shayne said to Rolf. "I think he found it. Probably found a wallet, too. Maybe the passport. It doesn't stand to reason the man would have no papers at all on him."

Rolf agreed. "That's what I figure, Mike. But why? We'll identify him."

"Maybe not so easy," Shayne said.

"Time?"

"That's what I think. The killer needed a little time to do something, or get somewhere. It was probably a kind of afterthought, though. I mean, Fred, I think the killer was really looking for something, too."

"And found it?"

Shayne nodded. "That's my guess. He wasn't being pushed. He could have turned the house upside down, but he didn't. No, I think he found exactly what he wanted."

"You think the guy was killed for whatever it was?" Rolf said.

"Maybe, and maybe not. The long time he spent in here makes me wonder. I figure if he had really just wanted something, he'd have killed and run."

"Then you figure he wanted the guy dead?"

"It looks like it. Anyway, our killer must have known his victim pretty well. Not only did they have a long beer session, the killer must have been pretty sure that no one else would show up."

Rolf nodded. "What are you going to do?"

"Talk to my client."

"Do that, Mike. Then bring him in, okay? By then maybe I'll know who the victim is, and something about him," Rolf said.

Rolf left a policeman in the house and joined his men outside.

They had nothing to report. The

backyard consisted half of a concrete patio, and the rest was hard-baked ground. There had been no rain for months. There were no fingerprints, and the killer had left no calling cards. Mike Shayne studied the yard himself while Rolf finished up, but he found no more than the police.

The red-head walked slowly back to his car. He still didn't like it that the killing had happened under his nose, but he knew he could not blame himself. He had simply been following a man to see who and what he was. The killer had been in the house. There was no way that Shayne could have stopped the murder.

There was also no reason to think that his presence had had anything to do with what happened. No, this killing had been in the works before Shayne ever got on the matter. It looked like the stocky man had made someone else nervous in addition to Manfred Bauer—unless Bauer was the killer.

He had told Rolf that he was going to talk to his client. This was not precisely true. He wanted to talk to Manfred Bauer, not his daughter. He would have to reveal to Bauer that Alicia had hired him, but this was now murder. Maybe Manfred Bauer would be glad to find that he had help.

Shayne drove slowly back the way he had come in the sun of the afternoon. He stopped once to call Lucy Hamilton. She had nothing to report on the Bauer matter—no one had called. Alicia Bauer had made no further contact.

Shayne got back into his car and drove on toward the house of Manfred Bauer.

In his mind he was going over a series of facts: Bauer had come from Europe, did not talk about it; the dead man had many stickers on his suitcases, indicating European travel; the pictures connected Bauer and the dead man in the past. Manfred Bauer's suddenly appearing pistol was a Luger, a German pistol; Bauer made frequent trips to Europe.

Taken alone, none of these facts meant much. But taken together? He would be interested in just what kind of passport Rolf turned up for the dead man. He would also be interested to hear what Manfred Bauer had to say about the dead man.

IV

MANFRED BAUER had nothing to say about the dead man. The bearded jewel merchant was not glad to find that he had help. Bauer was, in fact, coldly furious.

Shayne had driven straight to the Bauer home. He had parked and observed for a moment. There had been nothing unusual, no particular activity. He had left his car and gone silently to the garage. He felt the hoods of both cars—a large

black Buick; and a small sporty Mercedes coupe—and found them both warm.

Shayne had gone up to the house and knocked. The man who answered was tall and bearded, a full beard that covered most of his face. The man in the picture given to Shayne by the daughter, and the same man Shayne had seen in the picture in the dead man's house—heavier, fuller-faced, bearded and a lot older. But the same man.

"Yes?" Manfred Bauer said, and the accent was heavy. Some Middle-European accent. Russian or Czech? And yet not quite.

"Manfred Bauer?" Shayne said.

The man nodded. "Yes."

Shayne edged his way in. "My name is Shayne, Mr. Bauer. Mike Shayne."

Bauer stepped back reluctantly. "So?"

"I'm a private detective, Mr. Bauer," Shayne said quietly.

The tall, bearded man blinked. "A detective?"

"Yes."

"There is some problem with stones? Gems?" Bauer asked.

"Perhaps you could tell me," Shayne said.

"You are not sent by some company to talk to me?"

"No," Shayne said. "It's about a man who visited you, a Luger, the way you have been acting. You're afraid of something, Mr. Bauer?"

The tall man stepped closer to push Shayne out. "Ah, Alicia! Yes, I knew she was planning some foolishness! You will please go, Mr. Shayne."

"I think you better talk to me," the red-head said quietly.

"So? And why should I talk to you? Because my daughter has foolish notions about a man she does not even know? Because I clean my pistol? Because I have, perhaps, some business worries? No, you should not listen to the imagination of a young girl who has, perhaps, been too sheltered."

"No," Shayne said. "Because the man she does not know has just been murdered."

Shayne had expected a reaction, but not quite what he got. The tall, bearded man almost staggered backwards. Then his face turned beet red with a surge of what could only be anger. Then he stepped toward Shayne, his fists clenched. Then he went white, and he stopped, stared at Mike Shayne.

"Dead?"

"Dead," Mike Shayne said. "Killed. Stabbed."

"Where?"

"In his own house. He knew his killer very well."

The bearded Bauer watched Shayne for a long minute. Then he stepped back and ushered the detective into the living room. It was a large, well-planned and well-kept room.

Shayne sat on a fine leather chair. Bauer sat facing him.

"You were there?" Bauer said. "He is dead?"

"May I ask where you were tonight, Mr. Bauer?" Shayne said.

"I had business," Bauer said shortly. "No, I cannot tell you what it was or where, and I cannot prove where I was."

"Can't?"

"I will not," Bauer said.

"You knew him. His killer knew him."

"Yes, I knew him," Bauer said.

"Do you drink beer?"

"Sometimes, Mr. Shayne. Doesn't every man drink some beer?"

"Every man didn't kill—What was his name?"

"You do not know his name?"

Shayne explained that there had been no identification on the body, and nothing in the house to indicate who the dead man had been. He did not mention the pictures he had seen, especially the picture with Bauer in it.

"I see," Bauer said.

"You won't tell me who he was?"

"I don't know who he was," Bauer said.

"You knew him, but you didn't know who he was, what his name was?"

"I knew him, but I did not know his name," Bauer said.

"I think you're lying," Shayne said.

"Perhaps."

"He had no personal possessions in that house," Shayne said.

"He was not a man who needed, or wanted, possessions. He did not have a home," Bauer said.

"You hadn't seen him for a long time? Not since your last trip to Europe?" Shayne said.

"Perhaps I should offer you a drink, Mr. Shayne," Bauer said.

Shayne studied the bearded man. Manfred Bauer was not going to tell him anything. For whatever reason, Bauer had no desire or intention of helping him. After his initial violent reaction, Bauer had retreated into a shell of ice.

"Who else knew him, Mr. Bauer? Who else took out an old pistol and got it ready? Maybe an old knife?"

"I couldn't say," Bauer said.

"What was it, Bauer? Blackmail?"

Bauer raised an eyebrow. "Blackmail? Ah, yes, my daughter again and her imagination. No, Mr. Shayne, not blackmail. It is actually nothing. If someone killed him, I could not begin to guess why."

"You had no reason to kill him?"

"No."

"And you know of no one who did?"

"No one, Mr. Shayne. Perhaps it was some thief."

"To steal what? Some papers, maybe?"

It was the second reaction. A faint blink of the bearded jewel merchant's eyes. Only a twinge and no more. Bauer shrugged.

"A random thought, Mr.

Shayne? As I said, I have no idea."

"You don't seem disturbed by the murder," Shayne said.

"I am disturbed, Mr. Shayne. When you—" The bearded jewel merchant stopped. "I am disturbed. But you say he is dead. Then he is dead. What can my disturbance do for him now?"

Bauer had been about to say something that would have given Shayne some clue. But what? *When you—*? It was not enough. But Bauer had revealed one thing, his temperament. Something no man could hide, his psychological temperament. Bauer was cool, in tight control. A man, maybe, who had seen a lot of death.

"You know no reason he might have been killed?"

"No."

"No one who might have killed him?"

"No."

"He was not blackmailing you?"

"No."

"But you have no alibi?"

"None."

"You don't know his name or anything about him?"

"Nothing."

Shayne leaned forward in his chair. "I think every one of those answers is a lie."

"Think what you will," Bauer sighed. "If you have nothing more to say, you can leave."

"You don't need my help? Or want it?"

"I don't need anyone's help," Bauer said. "I will handle my own affairs, if you don't mind. I suggest you stop listening to the imaginative fictions of my daughter."

"Fictions? The man is dead, Bauer. Murdered! You know the police will want to talk to you. They'll learn what they have to learn without you."

"Then let them learn," Bauer said. "As I understand the law, unless you, or the police, care to charge me with a crime, I am free, not involved. I choose not to be involved."

"You are involved," Shayne said drily.

"Perhaps, but how I am is my affair," Bauer said.

"Maybe not for long," Shayne said.

"How long is again my affair."

In his mind, Shayne felt a twinge of suspicion. How long! The killer had bought time. Now it sounded very much like Manfred Bauer wanted time. Time for what? There was the question. Bauer knew that the dead man would be identified soon. It was the difference between *now* and *soon* that Bauer wanted. Or was it? Bauer stood up.

"Now I suggest you leave, Mr. Shayne," the bearded jewel merchant said. "And I further suggest you leave me alone. There is no work for you to do. My daughter cannot afford to pay you. I think you had better forget you ever heard of me or my foolish daughter."

"Maybe," Shayne said as he stood and turned for the door.

"Leave me alone, Shayne!" Bauer snapped.

Shayne did not bother to answer. There was something about the tall, bearded man. The sense of nervous excitement Alicia had reported.

Shayne turned at the entrance to the living room.

"Whatever it is, Bauer, a pistol won't solve it. Guns are bad things, Bauer. Guns and killing. You don't strike me as a killer."

"There are some things worse than guns, Mr. Shayne," Bauer said.

Shayne walked out into the hall and out through the front door. In the dark night he lit a cigarette. Bauer was mixed up in something. The question was, what? What and how deep, and how had the dead man figured. Blackmail was still more than possible, Bauer had reacted to the possibility of stolen papers. Still, it was not really Shayne's problem. The police had to know now what he knew. He would have to tell Rolf all he knew.

"Mr. Shayne?"

The red-head had reached his car. A slender figure stood beside it in the night. It was Alicia Bauer.

"I heard. That man is dead," Alicia said.

"Yes, he is," Shayne said drily.

"I heard it all! Father's mixed up in something, isn't he?"

"I think he is," Shayne said.

"He doesn't want help, but he has to have it!" Alicia said. "Oh, please, Mr. Shayne. Stay working for us! He was wrong. I can pay you."

Shayne rubbed his chin. "I don't know, Alicia. He won't cooperate. I'll have to report him to the police."

"All right," the girl said. "I know that. But please, I know he needs help. Protect him, Mr. Shayne."

Shayne considered. A man had been killed under his nose. He did not like that, and he did not like quitting on a murder case. After all, the girl was his client. He thought Bauer needed help, and he did not like an unfinished case of any kind.

"Okay, Alicia, I'll stay with it. You report anything you see. But remember, I'm staying to solve the case, not to help your father."

"All right, Mr. Shayne," Alicia said.

The girl kissed him lightly on the cheek and ran off toward the Bauer house.

Shayne grinned, scowled, and got into his car. It might not end the way Alicia Bauer wanted. But he would stay on the case. Only now there was nothing he could do, and a good night's sleep always helped.

He drove off toward his apartment-hotel and his dinner and some sleep. He should call Rolf, but that could keep until morning.

V

MIKE SHAYNE awakened to the gentle ringing of his telephone. Short, quick rings intended to alert him but not awaken him if he were sleeping soundly.

The red-head grinned and ran his big hands through his shock of hair. Pete, on the desk downstairs, was giving him the "let a working man sleep" treatment. Pete took good care of him.

He sat up and picked up the receiver. "Shayne."

"Mr. Shayne?" Pete's voice said solicitously. "I told her you were sleeping."

"It's okay, Pete. Put her on," Shayne said.

Lucy Hamilton's voice came on. "Michael?"

"Yes, Angel."

"It's almost nine o'clock. You have work to do. Alicia Bauer called and said that her father had gone out last night right after you left. He went to visit someone; he got back late."

"Okay, Angel," Shayne said. So Manfred Bauer was worried about something. Maybe it was too late already. Bauer had a gun, and the will to use it. "Any report on Bauer?"

"No, Alicia said he is home now. Lieutenant Rolf called. Not about Bauer, but about the man you found dead."

"Go on," Shayne said.

"That's all. Lieutenant Rolf said you could come down to Headquarters any time and talk."

"All right, Angel. I'll go straight to Rolf's office if anyone wants me."

After he hung up, Shayne dressed, clapped on his panama, and went out. He stopped in his favorite coffee shop for three eggs, some toast, orange juice and four cups of coffee.

Fortified, he got his car from the garage beneath the building and drove downtown in the Miami sun to Police Headquarters. Lieutenant Rolf was in his office.

"Ready to talk about your client?" Rolf said.

"What have you got?" Shayne countered.

Rolf was a good player. "Enough, but let's hear about your client."

Shayne told Rolf about Manfred Bauer. The lieutenant listened carefully. Rolf nodded as Shayne explained how he had gotten into the case, and his useless interview of the previous night.

"Europe, eh? That much fits," Rolf said.

"Our corpse was from Europe?"

"Originally. Lately he'd been from a lot of places," Rolf said. "We found his passport, and some other papers in the hotel room at the Hotel Waverly. We also found a small arsenal—three guns: another Luger, a Sten Gun, and a high-powered rifle with a telescopic sight. I'm damned if I know how

he got them into the country. Maybe he picked them all up here."

"Anything to show what he was up to?"

Rolf shook his head. "No luck there. But we got enough to spend most of the night on the phone and wire to half the capitals of the world. Interpol was a help."

"Tell me," Shayne said.

"His name was Saul Hoffman; Dutch citizen. He was forty-five years old. He traveled on a Dutch passport, but his residence is listed as Paris. He didn't even stay there very much. He seems to have traveled all over hell, from most of Europe to almost every country in South or Central America."

"Since the war?"

"Traveled everywhere. But *before* the war, from all I can learn, he never left Amsterdam. He was apprenticed to a diamond cutter. That was his profession."

"Diamonds? Gem stones?" Shayne asked.

"If you could call it a profession. He hardly ever worked at it since the war."

"How did he live?" Shayne asked.

"Beats me. Interpol said he lived fine, traveled, as I said, but they don't know where he got his money. It interested them."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. "How come they had a file on him at all?"

"Well, it seems that Hoffman traveled so much, and was in gems, so they watched him for smuggling —negative. Never found a thing. Besides, he had a record, and you know those continental police departments. They keep a close eye on a man with a record."

"What kind of record?" Shayne asked.

"Right after the war he got in trouble twice. First for a small-time blackmarket deal. Second for assault—beat up some guy in a bar. He got two years for that," Rolf said.

"Since then he's been clean. Not a whisper of trouble since he got out of jail in Amsterdam. Over twenty-years clean. Nobody's looking for him; Interpol even had him in its hold-but-forget file. They couldn't think of any reason for him being killed, unless it had to do with diamonds somehow."

"Connections in this country?"

"None that Interpol knows. He rarely came to this country. He lived, like I said, in Paris soon after the war. He'd only been in this country once before. The only interesting part of that is that the one time he was here he came to Miami! That was ten years ago."

"What did he do during the war?"

Rolf shook his head. "You know what the Germans did to Amsterdam. Hoffman was listed as dead until he showed up."

"Dead?"

"Deported to a slave labor camp, presumed dead. When he got

back he said he'd escaped at the end of the war and gone to Prague."

"Prague?" Shayne said quickly, remembering Manfred Bauer and his trips.

"Right, and the funny part is that he's made a few trips to Prague since the war. Supposedly they were working trips before the Reds took over, and after."

"Prague," Shayne said. "Manfred Bauer makes trips to Prague when he isn't supposed to."

"You think they met there?"

"It's possible," Shayne said. "The question is what did they meet about? I'm interested in how Hoffman lived. How did he get money without working for it? Why all those trips?"

"Smuggling, maybe?"

"Maybe. But why would Bauer smuggle? He looks like a man doing fine in a legitimate business. It almost sounds like they were looking for something? Maybe some loot left behind?"

This was a possibility. So was blackmail. So was smuggling. All three would explain unscheduled trips made by both men. But, somehow, Shayne did not feel that either smuggling or blackmail were involved. Yet it was something to do with the past. Maybe some crime? Something Hoffman had on Bauer, not exactly blackmail but only involvement? Say they had been in something together, and helped each other now. But what about all that traveling?

"When did Hoffman arrive in this country?" Shayne asked.

"About two weeks ago. He landed in New York, came straight down to Miami."

"Alone?"

Rolf eyed Shayne again. "You guess good, or you're holding out on me."

"I guess good. Who was with him?"

"A girl. Young and beautiful. Her name is Ahoova Zahn. They came into New York on the same jet. They checked into the same New York hotel. She's still there."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. "Damn, it doesn't make much sense. He landed in New York, came straight here. Did he rent that house?"

Rolf nodded. "The day he came down. Gave a Morris Schreiber as a reference. The hotel room he took the same day."

"What was that name he gave as a reference?" Shayne asked.

Rolf checked his notes. "Schreiber, Morris Schreiber. Why?"

"I'm not sure," Shayne said, but he remembered that name. It was the name of one of Manfred Bauer's friends, a friend from Europe. Alicia Bauer had mentioned him.

"You better tell me," Rolf said.

"No, I'm not sure of anything, Fred. Let me have some more time."

Rolf was silent. The lieutenant seemed to be wrestling with his po-

lice conscience. At last he shrugged.

"Okay, Mike, just a little more. You're going to send Bauer in?"

"He's not my client, but I told him to come in," Shayne said.

"I'll pick him up if he doesn't show soon," Rolf said. The lieutenant looked at his notes. "That's about all. Hoffman was in Berlin just before he came here. There was nothing going on about him in Berlin. He had a job. He seems to have left Berlin suddenly, but that's all."

"Berlin?" Shayne said. "He was there for a time?"

"Almost a year. Long for him."

"That's it?"

Rolf nodded. "Except that he's single. Or was, I guess we should say. He was married before the war, but his wife appears to have vanished. You know how it was in the war. I guess she was the woman in the picture we found."

The red-head tugged on his earlobe in the silence of Rolf's office. He was beginning to get an idea, but it would not jell. Some connection in a dim, hidden past between Saul Hoffman, murdered, and Manfred Bauer. Also Morris Schreiber. And probably Jacob Andric, the other friend of Bauer's that Alicia had mentioned.

All right, a connection, but what? And why had Hoffman been suddenly killed? Where did Hoffman get his money? Why did his appearance in Miami cause Bauer to get out his Luger? There was a key in the background of Saul Hoffman, but whatever it was it eluded Shayne. The red-head stood up.

Rolf said, "It begins to look to me like it's got to be smuggling, or blackmail based on smuggling. I mean, what do we have? A man who travels, has no visible means of support, is in the gem business. Then we have a man who is a jewel merchant, who also travels. When man number one, Hoffman, suddenly shows up in Miami for the first time in ten years, man number two, Bauer, gets nervous.

"Bauer gets out his gun, is excited, wants no part of you, Mike. Hoffman is killed, obviously by someone he knew pretty well. No, it adds up to something involving Bauer. Now, I'm not saying Bauer killed Hoffman, but I think Bauer is in on it somehow. I'm going to have to pll him in, Mike."

Shayne nodded. "Go ahead. But watch out; he's a hard nut. He can be stubborn as hell."

"So can I," Rolf said.

Shayne smiled as he left.

Downstairs in the lobby of police headquarters, Shayne went into a telephone booth to call Alicia Bauer. He told the girl what had happened, and asked what her father was doing.

"Nothing, Mr. Shayne. Not since he came home last night. That's part of what scares me. He just sits home, doesn't even go to his office."

Shayne asked for the address of Morris Schreiber. The girl gave it to him, and the telephone number and address of Schreiber's office. Morris Schreiber, it seemed, was in textiles.

Shayne told Alicia to sit tight, and hung up. He called Morris Schreiber's office.

Mr. Morris Schreiber was not in his office. He had not come in all day.

VI

MORRIS SCHREIBER lived in a house very much like that of Manfred Bauer. The house was quiet and set back from a shaded road in a develoment some ten miles from Bauer's house. This house looked no more like the home of someone involved in smuggling than Bauer's house did.

But it was not the house that interested Shayne—it was the second car. There was a big car parked in the garage of the house, and a second car, a dark blue Cadillac, parked out in front. Not only was Morris Schreiber at home instead of at work; he had a visitor. Shayne had a strong hunch that he knew who that visitor would be.

He left his car and walked to the front door of the Schreiber house. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a curtain move at the front window. Someone was watching him. He pressed the bell and waited. There was movement inside the house;

then heavy steps came toward the front door.

The man who opened the door was small and thin. His bald head glistened in the reflected sun. There was something about his eyes, almost a hunted look, and the eyes were not friendly.

"Morris Schreiber?" Shayne said.

"You are Shayne," the small man said. "We do not wish to talk to you."

Shayne now knew who Manfred Bauer had visited last night. The small man was primed and uncooperative. Shayne put on his most grim expression.

"Suit yourself, Schreiber, but I'll come back with the police. Your friend Bauer is already talking to Lieutenant Rolf. The lieutenant isn't on your side. I am."

"We do not want your help," the small man said.

Shayne shrugged. "I've been hired. I'm going to work on this case whether you like it or not. You can talk to me, or you can fight me, but I'm going to find out who killed Saul Hoffman!"

The small man paled. "You—you know? Manfred said—"

"That was last night. Last night I didn't know who the dead man was. Now I know, and so do the police. In hours they'll know more. You don't have a lot of time."

"I—"the small man began.

A woman's voice spoke from behind the man. "Let him come in, Morris."

Morris Schreiber stepped aside and Shayne walked in. The woman who had spoken stood in an archway between the entrance hall and the living room. She was a short woman, middle-aged and not pretty. She had never been pretty, but there was something about her, a softness. Her eyes were clear and open, and something else—frightened.

"I'm Natalie Schreiber, Mr. Shayne," the woman said. "Come into the living room."

Shayne stepped into the living room behind the woman. Morris Schreiber brought up the rear. In the room a man and another woman were seated on a long couch. They did not get up. The man was a thick, shapeless man of about the same age as Schreiber and Bauer. His left arm was missing. His left leg stuck out straight as if it was stiff, injured.

"Mr. and Mrs. Andric," Natalie Schreiber introduced.

Jacob Andric nodded. Shayne looked at him. He had guessed that the visitor would be Andric. The thick, heavy man was less pleased than any of them to see Shayne. Mrs. Helga Andric was a tall woman with a sharp face and a heavy tan. She sat quietly beside her husband, her dark, almost black eyes fixed on Shayne.

"Sit down, Mr. Shayne," Natalie Schreiber said.

Shayne sat down. They all sat and stared at the red-head. Morris Schreiber, small and nervous, perched on the edge of a chair. With his sharp nose and bald head he looked like some small bird ready to fly at the first hint of trouble or danger.

Natalie Schreiber clasped and unclasped her hands in her lap. She watched Shayne, but she also watched the other three, her eyes looking from face to face in the room.

Jacob Andric sat rigid, almost without moving a muscle of his heavy frame. Almost, but not quite—the one good arm was at his side, and the fingers jerked and twitched as if they had a life of their own.

Mrs. Andric was the calmest of them all. The tall woman sat with her hands folded in her lap. From time to time her right hand reached out to touch and console her crippled husband.

"Well," Shayne said simply. "Is anyone going to tell me about Saul Hoffman?"

Morris Schreiber licked his lips. "He is—was a man we knew in Europe."

"We? All of you?" Shayne said.

"I—"Schreiber stammered.

Andric broke in. "All right, you've told him that! Now no more. We do not have to talk to this one. Bauer said we do not talk to this one."

"Bauer is talking to the police," Shayne said drily. "You all knew Hoffman, right? Now what was he doing here?"

"We don't know," Andric said.

"Come on," Shayne said. "All he did was appear and he made Bauer nervous, excited. I can see that he's got you all sitting on nails. You were his reference for that house, Schreiber."

"I knew him from Europe, no more," Schreiber said, calm now.

"Europe is a big place," Shayne said. "I'll take a guess. You're all from Amsterdam."

Schreiber shook his head. "No. Hoffman was Dutch. I come from Berlin. Andric is from Prague. Bauer is from Vienna."

"Then how do you all know each other?" Shayne snapped.

Andric scowled. "From the German camps, Shayne! We were all in concentration camps. Is that so mysterious?"

"No," Shayne admitted. "Are you all in the same business now, too?" Shayne was considering the smuggling angle again.

Andric looked at his crippled leg and his missing arm. "I was a butcher in Europe, nothing else. Now I am in the jewel business, yes. I am a middleman, an agent for other companies. I represent many companies as a wholesaler. It is desk work."

"You represent Bauer?" the redhead asked.

"Yes."

"Do you travel a lot, like Bauer? Does Schreiber?" Shayne said.

"Yes," Andric said. "We travel a great deal. Schreiber makes many trips to buy cloth. Manfred Bauer you know about. Hoffman traveled much. I, myself, do not like to travel with this leg, but my wife travels much for me. Is that all? Shayne, we do not know who killed Hoffman or why. We knew him, not his life. We have no ideas. He was a man we knew from the past. We had not seen him in years. We—"

"Ten years," Shayne said. "If you're going to tell me that you never saw him in Europe. Ten years ago he came here."

Andric nodded. 'You are a good detective. Yes, ten years. Who killed him, and why, I think you might learn more about from his more recent friends."

"Such as the girl in New York?"

Shayne got his reaction. Schreiber went white. Andric blinked. Helga Andric shifted on the couch and looked puzzled. Her hands opened and closed in spasms. Natalie Schreiber seemed only puzzled. She looked at the others.

Shayne waited. He saw by their eyes that they had decided to lie. The two men, that is. The women

had not known about the girl in New York.

'We know of no woman in New 'York," Andric said. "His personal life we did not know."

"Bauer just oiled up his Luger to greet a casual friend from the old days?" Shayne said drily.

"Perhaps there was no connection, Shayne," Andric said.

Shayne shifted the attack. "How did Hoffman live? Where did he get the money for all his trips?"

"Ask him!"

The voice was that of Helga Andric. The tall woman spoke for the first time. Her black eyes were flat and steady on Shayne. Her- voice was as clear and controlled as steel.

"I'm asking you," Shayne said.

"We cannot answer what we don't know!"

Andric touched his wife. "Calm yourself, Helga."

"While this stupid oaf is badgering us!" Helga Andric cried.

Andric looked at Shayne. "You had better go, Shayne. I will not have my wife upset."

But Shayne was thinking of something else. Helga Andric had an accent. A peculiar accent, one that Shayne could not place. It was not strong, she spoke a good English, much better than either her husband, Schreiber, or Bauer. But there was an accent. Natalie Schreiber had no accent.

"I said you had better go!" Jacob Andric insisted.

Shayne watched them. All the others seemed to defer to Andric. There was something belligerent about the crippled man, as if he had earned the right to be tough and the leader.

It was now more than clear that Shayne was going to get no more from them than he had from Bauer. They too had some reason for failing to cooperate. Shayne's idea was taking shape. He had four men, all from Europe, all with pasts. One man who traveled a lot, had money from some unknown source, and who appeared in Miami only to be killed.

Three others who were extremely anxious to impede any investigation, who wanted *time*. One of the three got out his gun. The dead man had had a small arsenal of guns and two places of residence. All three of the men were nervous, and all three knew about the girl in New York. And he had a strong hunch that they all had a good guess as to who had killed Hoffman, and more than a good guess as to why.

It had all the signs of some *project*—something the four men, or perhaps only three, wanted to do before the police could find out what it was and stop them! It was something that the police would stop, or that they assumed the police would want to stop. But what? Smuggling? Location of some blackmail evidence? The division of some loot or some treasure found during the war?

"I said go, Mr. Shayne," Andric said.

They were all standing, ranged in front of Shayne. Shayne looked slowly along the line of their faces.

"You know, whatever it is, you can't get away with it. A man has been killed. The police will watch you all," Shayne said.

"I think not, Mr. Shayne," Helga Andric said. "We did not kill Hoffman. Leave us alone, and the police will."

"Maybe," Shayne said.

He walked out of the living room into the hall. He clapped his panama back on his shock of red hair, and went out and down the walk. He turned left when he reached the street and walked to where he had parked his car.

He got in and drove away—around the block and came back to park near the house but out of sight.

Shayne settled to watch.

VII

MIKE SHAYNE did not watch for long. Almost as soon as he had returned and parked up the street, Andric and Helga came out and got into their car and drove off. Shayne waited.

It was some time before Morris Schreiber backed his car out of the driveway and drove away. Shayne was in luck. He got out of his car and walked back to the house. He rang the bell again. Natalie Schreiber stood in the doorway and looked at him.

"I think you want to tell me something, Mrs. Schreiber," Shayne said.

Because it had suddenly dawned on him in the house that, like Alicia Bauer, Mrs. Schreiber did not know all that was going on. But he thought she knew more than Alicia.

"Tell you?" Natalie Schreiber said.

"Yes," Shayne said. "Can I come in?"

The woman stepped back. Shayne walked past her and into the living room. Natalie Schreiber sat on a chair and her face was a study in worry and a certain fear. She looked up at Shayne. The detective waited. There was a time to push and a time to let a person talk at her own pace.

"What can I tell you? I know very little more than you do. In fact, you must know much more about Hoffman than I did."

"You don't know what his actual connections was to your husband and the others?"

Natalie Schreiber shook her head. "No. That belongs to the past, the time in Europe. Morris has never talked about that. As far as I know none of them have. Oh, I know that they knew each other over there, that somehow they were involved with each other in something. But I don't know what."

"But you know enough to be worried," Shayne said gently.

"Worried and afraid, Mr. Shayne."

"Afraid? Then you do know something."

The woman hesitated, nodded. "I know that ever since that Hoffman appeared, my husband and the others have been nervous, concerned. They have been excited—"

Excited! The same word Alicia Bauer had used.

"I can't quite place exactly how they have been acting. Very on edge, you could say. Morris is not an excitable man, and neither is Manfred Bauer. That is what is so odd. Andric? Well, he is excitable. Touchy, you might say. They have always—well, deferred to Andric, treated him with respect."

"Would you say he was the leader?" Shayne asked.

"No, not the leader. That is Manfred Bauer. Manfred has always been the strong one. My Morris is, well, a little reserved, even timid. And that is what is so strange about him since that Hoffman person appeared."

"Andric isn't the leader, yet they defer to him?"

Natalie Schreiber nodded. "Take his work. He said he is a representative, and he is. What they did not say is that Andric does little work, and yet he represents many companies. I think Morris and Manfred got him the companies to represent. He has some kind of hold on them. I know that my husband helped him send his two boys to college, and I think Manfred did also. Helga is proud, but even with her help he needs money."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. Blackmail? Andric a blackmailer? Then, maybe, Hoffman had been cutting in? There was a motive for murder—but could the crippled man get around? No, the person Shayne had seen running had not been crippled.

"Just what is frightening you?" Shayne said quietly.

The woman stood up and paced. Then she turned and looked at Shayne. He waited. It was a time to let her decide without pressing her. She sat down again.

"They are involved in some plan. I don't know what or why or what they expect to gain. But since that Hoffman appeared, they have been together constantly, the three of them. They have talked and talked. I overheard some of it. Mr. Shayne, they are planning something dangerous, something very serious, and something illegal, I think. I'm afraid there could even be a killing!"

Shayne pulled on his earlobe. "Killing?"

"Yes, I'm sure of it. This Hoffman matter has bothered them all very much. Manfred was here for hours last night. I listened some. They seem to be worried about *time* now."

"But they're going through with it, whatever it is?"

Natalie Schreiber's voice was a whisper. "Yes."

Shayne hesitated as if thinking. Then he stood and began to pace in turn. He turned to Natalie Schreiber.

"Did one of them, or all three, kill Hoffman?"

"I—I don't know," the woman whispered. She looked up at Shayne. "I've thought about it. Morris was out last night. He didn't tell me where."

"What about Andric?" Shayne said.

"I think he was home. I mean, I know he was home about nine o'clock. I called to talk to Helga. She was at her history class, she teaches an adult education class on modern European history, you know. That shows how distraught I've been; I simply forgot about her class. But Andric was home."

Shayne tugged on his ear. "All right, Mrs. Schreiber. You've helped a lot. Don't mention this little talk to your husband."

"Of course not."

Outside again, Mike Shayne was thoughtful as he walked back to his car. It was all adding up to the matter of time—the three men wanted time to complete some plan. The question was, had Hoffman been one of them and on their side, or had he been an enemy and against them?

Only his training, the sixth sense that warned of danger, the quick eye that was the real basis of that so-called sixth sense, saved Shayne. As he walked toward his car, while he was deep in thought about the connection of Saul Hoffman to the other three, he saw, out of the corner of his eye, the flash of sunlight. He reacted at once by stopping and crouching.

LUCY HAMILTON

The shot echoed along the deserted street.

Shayne hurled himself sideways and flat.

The bullet had missed him by inches, tearing up the dirt in the front yard beyond him.

The red-head rolled into the shelter of a parked car.

There was no second shot.

Shayne raised up and peered off toward where he had seen the flash—sun reflected from a telescopic sight, he was sure.

He saw something, or someone, move far off among trees and bushes. He jumped up, his automatic drawn and charged across the street toward the moving figure. The figure vanished in the other direction. Shayne pursued.

He reached the next street, and saw the trousers of the attacker just vanishing behind another house across this street. Shayne redoubled his speed and raced on.

There was an alley in the middle of the block. He reached it and saw the running figure go over a fence ahead.

Shayne continued the grim pursuit. He vaulted over the fence and went on through a backyard out into the third street. He reached the street just in time to see a small grey car pull away from the curb and race down the street. He stopped and watched the car pick up speed.

Not only had his attacker had the car waiting, but had also left the motor running—a clever and efficient attacker. The way no second shot had been wasted proved that. After the first shot had missed, a second shot would only have given Shayne time to work his way closer to his attacker, while having little chance to hit its mark.

His attacker had all the marks of expertness that had characterized the killer of Saul Hoffman!

Shayne walked back through the yards to his car. No one had come from the houses to look, to see what the trouble was, and, perhaps, to help. Shayne looked sourly at all the silent houses. People did not want to be involved. It was the state of the nation.

At his car Mike Shayne thought for a time, and then drove to the first tavern he could find. In the tavern he went to a telephone and called Alicia Bauer. The girl was home. But Manfred Bauer was not.

"No, Mr. Shayne, father has been out for an hour or so. Why?"

"Never mind, Alicia. Keep an eye on him. If you see anything that worries you, call my office. I'll get the message."

"All right, Mr. Shayne," the girl said.

Shayne hung up and immediately dialed his office. Lucy Hamilton's voice was excited.

"News, Angel?"

"Not that I can tell you, Michael, but Lieutenant Rolf called. He said he'd heard from Amsterdam, and that you could go to Headquarters any time."

"Thanks, Angel."

In his car again, Shayne drove through the quiet outskirts into the heavy traffic of the city itself. It was past noon when he arrived at Headquarters and went up to Lieutenant Rolf's office. The lieutenant was not there, and Shayne settled down to

wait. After an hour he went out to have some lunch.

He got back at about three o'clock. Rolf came in soon after.

VIII

LIEUTENANT ROLF went to his desk without a word and sat down. He opened a file and scowled. Mike Shayne waited in a chair. Rolf finally looked up and smiled sourly.

"Well, I had a long session with Bauer," Rolf said. "I had about as much luck as you did. He knows his rights, and he knows we have no evidence."

"He didn't tell you anything?"

"Only that his trips to Prague were sudden business matters," Rolf said. "He said they were unexpected leads on good batches of jewels, and he can prove it. He's lying, of course, but we'd have a hell of a time proving otherwise, especially in a place behind the curtain."

"Meaning that he went there on business and can prove it," Shayne said, "But he also had some other reason which we can't prove so easily."

"That's about the size of it, I figure."

"What time did you let him go?"

"About eleven-fifteen this morning. I've been out with my men going over Saul Hoffman's two places again since then. Nothing."

Shayne took out a cigarette and lit it. That gave Bauer plenty of chance to have been the sniper who had tried to kill Shayne. Which meant that any of them could have done it. He was pretty sure that Schreiber and Ardric would have no alibis. They would have been driving, even if they had not been a part of the shooting attempt?

"We had word from New York. The Ahoova Zahn woman has been in New York ever since she landed; no side trips of any kind. She's in a hotel, has made no attempt to hide or to contact Hoffman as far as the New York police can find out."

Shayne smoked and explained what Natalie Schreiber had told him. Rolf listened carefully. Shayne also mentioned the attempt on his life. Rolf frowned.

"This is getting dangerous, Mike. The way you tell it, any of them could have done it. Schreiber came down here to see if he could help Bauer, but he had time to shoot at you before he got here. I don't like the whole deal. There's something missing, the whole key."

"They have a plan, Fred," Shayne said. "I'm as sure of that as Natalie Schreiber. It's not what they've done that's important, it's what they plan to do. The murder of Hoffman is part of it, but I think it's only a by-product, a side-issue. Natalie thinks their plan involves a killing—and not Hoffman's murder. I don't think Hoffman's murder was part of the plan, but I can't figure yet just how it does fit in."

Rolf swiveled in his chair. "You think the three of them are out to kill someone?"

"It looks just like that to me! What I don't know is, which side is which? I mean, was Hoffman one of them, maybe the finger man, and the enemy killed him? Remember, all the action began when Hoffman showed up here in Miami. Maybe he brought the news of the victim. Or was he against them? Maybe Hoffman was a friend of the victim and came down here to buy them off, kill them with his arsenal, or talk them out of their plan, and *they* killed him."

Rolf was thoughtful. The lieutenant swiveled for a moment; then he opened the file again. He studied it for a moment. Then he looked up at Shayne.

"Maybe this will help. We just got some additional word from Amsterdam. I had that picture of Hoffman and his wife radioed over. At least, we all thought it was Saul Hoffman and his wife."

"It isn't?"

Rolf shrugged. "Well, it's our dead man, and it's Hoffman, according to pictures in the Interpol files, and it's Hoffman in the files of half a dozen other police departments including Amsterdam. But—"

"But?" Shayne snapped.

"But it isn't Hoffman, or his missing wife, according to people who knew him *before* the war!"

Mike Shayne tugged very hard on his left earlobe. For once he was speechless—parts, ideas, were beginning to fall into place.

Rolf went on quietly: "It seems that because Hoffman was now dead, they wanted to find the next of kin. They'd never checked up before, no need to. He had all Hoffman's proper identification when he showed up again after the war. There was no reason for the police to doubt then, or any time after that—the file had been built up.

"You know how it works—Paris checked with Amsterdam; Rome with Paris, and so on. Once he had his new picture on file at Amsterdam, it was a thousand to one against anyone learning. Until he died. The Amsterdam police showed the picture to people in his pre-war village, relatives of his missing wife—and the dead man is not Saul Hoffman! The woman is not Hoffman's wife."

Shayne tugged hard on his ear. "Not Hoffman, but had all of Hoffman's identification when he showed up *after* the war. Which means that sometime between Hoffman's being missing from Holland, and the impostor turning up, our man must have known the real Hoffman."

Rolf nodded. "That's what the Amsterdam police and Interpol thought, so they forwarded all they have on the real Saul Hoffman. It's not much, Mike. Saul Hoffman was a diamond cutter all right, and

he lived in Amsterdam before the war. After the Germans came he joined the underground for a short time, then he vanished. All the authorities ever learned was that he had been shipped to some camp in Germany. Nothing else was known. He was presumed dead, until our man showed up after the war.

"The real Hoffman had had no record with any police, no pics or prints on file. So our man was accepted as Hoffman. He built up a police record of his own. You'll note that he didn't stay around Amsterdam, or Holland, much after the war. He lived in Paris."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. "So they met somewhere in Germany. It has to be. And that makes it pretty sure our other three also met in Germany, just as they said."

"Nazis hiding out now?" Rolf said.

"Maybe, but their accents aren't German. That's odd, too. Except for Andric, they all have German names, yet their accents aren't German."

"We could have Interpol and Washington run a trace on all of them," Rolf said.

Shayne nodded. "We could and we should, but time is a big factor, Fred. They're up to something. I get the feeling that the death of Hoffman has speeded things up. We've got to get one of them to talk."

Rolf shook his head. "I can't pressure them, Mike. I've got nothing to go on. It'd be my badge to work on any of them without even a decent suspicion charge."

"But I can," Shayne said grimly.

"Don't tell me about it, Mike," Rolf said, "and be careful. Strong-arm stuff could cost you your license."

Shayne was grim. "I know it could, Fred, but if we don't stop them, it could cost someone his life!"

Shayne left the lieutenant looking worried. The big red-head went down in the elevator and out to his car in the late afternoon sun of Miami.

He was more than worried. Four men who were excited about something, who had guns ready, who had hazy pasts, and one of them was dead. He had a cold feeling that if he did not learn soon what it was all about there would be more dead men.

He thought about this all the way out to the house of Morris Schreiber again. Schreiber was the one he would try to break. The small man seemed the weak link. Both Bauer and Andric were hard men with tough wills. But Schreiber seemed to be softer. Schreiber was the red-head's best chance.

He was in luck. When he parked and strode up to the door of the quiet house in the early evening sun, Morris Schreiber himself answered the door.

The small man seemed startled to see the detective.

"Shayne! What in hell are you doing—"

Shayne pushed past the small man. "You're alone?"

Shayne looked around the neat living room. It was empty; the house was silent. Schreiber followed Shayne into the living room.

"Yes, I am alone. Natalie is out. Why?" Schreiber said.

Shayne turned. He made his face as grim as possible. He fixed a stony gaze on the small man. He was going to try a big bluff, and he wanted Schreiber to be shaken even before he began. But when he turned he looked straight into the muzzle of a Luger.

"Just be calm, Mr. Shayne," Schreiber said.

Schreiber suddenly did not seem as small and weak. The muzzle of the Luger never wavered. It was aimed directly at Shayne's belly.

"I don't know why you are here, Mr. Shayne, but I cannot take the chance that you might try to stop us. Just sit down there, and relax. I must hold you here a few hours."

Shayne moved toward the small man. Schreiber thrust the Luger forward.

"Sit down, Mr. Shayne!"

Mike Shayne sat.

IX

MIKE SHAYNE stared at the small man, who sat perched in a straight chair just out of his reach, the Luger steady in his hand.

"Don't be a fool, Schreiber!" Shayne snapped. "Hoffman is dead. Today someone tried to kill me. You can't go through with it now."

Schreiber watched the red-head calmly.

"Go through with what, Mr. Shayne?"

"Do I have to spell it out?" Shayne said. Now he had to hope that his bluff would work. It was more than obvious that the plan was underway. Schreiber had been ready to go, had been ready with his gun. The only conclusion now was that Bauer and Andric were somewhere on their way to complete their plan.

"Spell out what, Mr. Shayne? What do you think you know?"

"Stop them, Schreiber!" Shayne snapped.

Schreiber looked at his watch. "It is too late anyway, Mr. Shayne. By now they will know that I am not coming; they will go on their own. That is the way we arranged it. That much I will tell you. Afterwards you will not know what happened."

"I know enough already, Schreiber," Shayne bluffed. He was desperately constructing a plausible story in his mind from the meager facts he had.

"Really?" Schreiber said, smiled.

Shayne hit as hard as he could. "I know that Saul Hoffman was not Saul Hoffman!"

The smile vanished from Schrei-

ber's face as if wiped off by a physical blow. The Luger wavered. Shayne pressed his quick advantage. He improvised with guesses

"I know that none of you are who you seem to be! I know about the German camp. I know that the killer of Hoffman was known to Hoffman, known to all of you! Now you plan to kill that man. You—"

Schreiber was on his feet, pale as death. "You know? How do you —No! You are guessing!"

Shayne shook his head slowly. "No, I'm not guessing. The Amsterdam police showed Hoffman's picture to the family of his wife. They say the man you call Hoffman was not Hoffman. None of you have German accents, yet you have German names. You all have pasts your families don't know about."

"All guesses!" Schreiber cried, but the Luger was less steady.

"Some," Shayne admitted, "but pretty good guesses. The way I see it, someone has something on you all. Probably illegal entry into this country, maybe something worse in your pasts. This someone worries you all. Hoffman had been looking for this man for a long time. You all have. That was why Bauer made all those trips.

"I think Hoffman spotted your man at last when he was in Berlin. I think he watched your man. Then he got his chance—the man came to New York. Hoffman followed him. He had a girl with him, and

he left her in New York to watch your man. He came down here. You four laid your plans. Only something went wrong. Your man gave the girl the slip and came down and killed Hoffman. Now you three are going to kill him."

Shayne stopped. There was a silence in the quiet living room. A peaceful room with the evening sun warm through the windows. Schreiber was very pale as he stood and watched Mike Shayne. When he spoke his voice was low.

"You have guessed well, Mr. Shayne, but it does not matter. Soon you will be able to prove nothing. Yes, there is a man. It does not matter who he is or why he must die. Believe me, he deserves to. We have thought and thought all these years, but there is no other way.

"When Hoffman finally found him we were glad. When he came

here we were even happier. Oh, we were ready to kill him, but first we wanted to talk to him. Then he came down here and killed Hoffman!! For such a man there is only one way to stop him!"

The small man wiped his eyes as if there were a fog in front of them. "How he eluded the girl we do not know. With Hoffman dead we did not know how to contact her." The small man looked at Shayne. "Fortunately, she knew how to contact us. The swine we will kill was well-protected, but he has made his mistake now. The girl called and told us. Now we will kill him. No one will know!"

"What about me?" Shayne said.

Schreiber said nothing. The small man only shrugged.

"Kill me too, eh?" Shayne said. "You fool, don't you think the police know all that I know? Think, Schreiber! How long will it take the police to trace all four of you now that we know about Hoffman? The man has killed Hoffman; let the police handle it."

"No!" Schreiber snapped.

"What can you gain?"

"No! The police will not trace us. We have worked too long and too hard to make new lives. We cannot risk it! Go back? No, Mr. Shayne, never. We would rather die than go back."

Now Shayne's voice was low and hard. "You'll go back anyway, if that's what the result will be. Are you sure you'd be sent back? You'll kill this man, and then me, and then who else? You can't kill and get away with it. The man you're afraid of is a murderer. The police will find him. Who will accept the story of a murderer? But if you kill you're through, finished—and your families with you!"

Shayne spoke as convincingly as he could, but he was not at all sure that what he said was true. It was more than possible that they could kill their man, and him, and get away with it. But he had to convince Schreiber. He saw by the small man's face that he was wavering. Schreiber was not a killer. It was Shayne's one chance.

"Take your chances with the law, Schreiber. You've all built new lives in a new country. Trust that country. Don't become murderers! That way you don't have any chance. Tell me who the man is, where Bauer and Andric have gone. Trust your new country!"

Schweiber wavered. "You know about Hoffman?"

"Yes, we know. About how all four of you took new identities in that concentration camp." It was a wild shot, but Shayne also knew that it was a logical guess. It was, in fact, amost the only plausible explanation for it all.

Schreiber was jolted into the past. The small man let his pistol lower, point almost at the floor. "Five. There were five of us, all together; that was why it was such a shock when the notes started com-

ing. Who could have even dreamed Tomashek would turn against us, that he even survived? Twenty years we have paid that vulture!

"But Hoffman found him in Berlin. Then we had to wait almost a year, but at last he came to New York and we had our chance. We meant to talk to him, perhaps frighten him, beg him even. But he killed Hoffman. Now it will all come out! Now we will be sent back to—"

Shayne watched the small man. He saw the anger returning, the hatred for this man Tomashek. Schreiber was wavering between hate and fear; between a desire, a need, for revenge, and his normal respect for law and peace; between hope that one death would save them all, and his natural fear of violence. Shayne had to tip the scales his own way.

"No, Tomashek will be caught. What he says won't be counted. You'll have turned in a killer; it'll count for you. Where is Tomashek? Where will they try to kill him, Bauer and Andric?"

"In New York. The Waldorf-Astoria. He goes to a dinner tonight. They will capture him, take him to the cab—"

A sudden shot ripped the silent room.

Schreiber seem to leap into the air and hurl backwards.

The small man's mouth came open and his eyes glazed before he slammed against a table and crashed to the floor on top of the broken table.

A single shot from behind Mike Shayne.

The detective whirled.

The second shot was almost in Shayne's face.

The bullet creased his skull. Only a scalp wound but with force enough to knock the big red-head sideways and over. He fell and his head smashed against a leg of the heavy couch. He had a vague sense of hearing footsteps running away before he passed out.

THE ANGEL leaned down over him. Mike Shayne had never seen anything so beautiful. He reached up to hold it. She moved away, the angel. All in white, just as he had always known an angel would be. All in white with a golden halo and ruby lips and a beatific smile.

"He'll live," a voice said.

It was the angel speaking. Shayne could see the red lips move. But the voice hurt his ears and suddenly there was more than the angel. There was light, a hazy light rapidly clearing. And some kind of fence. A metal fence, also white. Then more faces that seemed to move in close to him.

"Not even awake and he reaches for the nurse. That's my Mike," a gruff voice said.

Shayne blinked, and there were all the faces. The gruff face with the black cigar in its mouth that had spoken last. A pretty woman's

face. The smiling face of another man. And the angel. Shayne looked around. He was in bed, in a room that was clearly a hospital, and the faces were: Will Gentry, Miami Chief of Police; Lucy Hamilton; Lieutenant Rolf; and the nurse.

"I wish I wasn't awake," Shayne said. "What the hell am I doing here?"

"You tell us," Will Gentry said. "Rolf found you out cold with Schreiber's body."

"Schreiber's dead?" Shayne said.

He sat up quickly. It was too quick. His head swam and he felt faint. He reached up and touched his head. It was mostly bandage and it hurt. He winced.

"Only a scalp wound, but it was a forty-five automatic. Knocked you down and you hit your head," Rolf said. "Doc says you're okay."

Shayne looked at Lieutenant Rolf. His head still felt thick. He could not focus his thoughts.

"You found me?" Shayne said to Rolf.

Rolf nodded. "I was coming to tell you that Bauer and Andric had flown the coop. Can't find anyone. The ladies are missing too, all three of them: Mrs. Andric, Mrs. Schreiber and Alicia Bauer."

"And you found me when you came to tell me?"

"Out cold. Whoever did it beat it out the back while I was ringing the front bell. I must have scared him off."

Shayne nodded, and winced at the throb in his head. "I heard feet running, but no bell."

"You were probably hearing a lot of bells," Gentry said. The bluff Chief of Police patted Shayne's shoulder. "I came when I heard. I thought you were really dead this time."

"I probably would have been if Rolf hadn't happened along. Schreiber is dead?"

"Right through the heart. Not a word. We've got an APB out on all of them. We—" Rolf said.

Shayne suddenly blinked. It all flooded back! Tomashek . . . New York . . . kill him . . . dinner . . . take him to the cab.

And then the shots. Someone had been listening. Someone who shot Schreiber first! Why? Because Schreiber had been about to tell where Bauer and Andric were! No, Schreiber had already told that. It was what Schreiber might have said next—the whole story!

Who and why? Why had the killer been there in the first place? To learn from Schreiber where Bauer and Andric were? And the killer had shot Schreiber first! Shayne only second. Rolf arrived or the killer would probably have finished the job. The killer probably thought he, Shayne, was dead anyway.

He had gone down from the single shot. Down and out. He must have looked dead.

Then what? New York!

Shayne looked at Lucy and Rolf

and Gentry. "How long have I been here?"

"About three hours," Rolf said. "Why?"

"Three hours? Damn it, we may be too late already!"

Shayne threw back the covers, swung his legs over the edge of the bed, and began to grope for his clothes. Lucy Hamilton and the nurse hurried from the room. Shayne was too deep in his thoughts to notice. Gentry and Rolf stared at Mike Shayne. The red-head had his pants on already.

"Where do you think you're going?" Gentry said.

"New York," Shayne said. "I hope to God there's still time to stop another murder or two. Will, can you get on the wire to the New York police to pick up the Zahn woman if they can, to put a special guard on a man named Tomashek staying at the Waldorf-Astoria, and to look for Bauer and Andric!"

"You're going nowhere!" Will Gentry roared. "You've just been shot; you've got a concussion! You can't—"

Shayne tucked in his shirt, started to tie his tie. He swayed, hung onto the bed table a moment, grinned at Will Gentry.

"There's one advantage to being a private cop, Will. I don't have to take your orders," Shayne said. He knotted his tie, reached for his jacket. "Instead of standing there looking like a disapproving wife, maybe you should get on that wire to New York. I'm serious, Will. There's going to be murder up there unless we stop it!"

Gentry opened his mouth, closed it again, glared at the big red-head. "Okay, Mike, I guess that fat head of yours is too thick to hurt. Go with him, Rolf; he's going to need some help with the New York police. He'll probably need help to stand up!"

Gentry turned on his heel and walked out. Shayne finished dressing, clapped his panama on his head, and winced. The hat perched on the bandages like a mushroom on a rock. Shayne strode from the room with Lieutenant Fred Rolf right behind him.

X

THE JET was high above Virginia in the night. Mike Shayne and Lieutenant Rolf had been wrapped in the silence of their own thoughts ever since leaving Miami. Shayne's head throbbed and he felt weak from the concussion, but there was little time.

There had been at least some good news—the New York police had Ahoova Zahn in custody, but there was no word on Tomashek, Bauer or Andric. In Miami, the police were still looking for the three women.

"Something's not right, Mike," Rolf said suddenly as the lights of Washington faded behind the jet below.

"I know, Fred," Shayne said. "From the little I learned from Schreiber, this Tomashek was a friend and then he turned against them—blackmail, from the sound of it, and over a long period of time. For some reason they couldn't get to him until he came to New York. Hoffman followed him, left the Zahn girl to watch him, and came to Miami to the other three."

"And Tomashek gave the girl the slip, came down to Miami, and killed Hoffman? Then he killed Schreiber?" Fred Rolf questioned.

Shayne tugged on his left earlobe. "I suppose it's possible, but I don't like it. If a man she was watching gave her the slip, she'd have called Miami and told them."

"Maybe she did," Rolf said. "After all, you said they had planned to talk to the man first. Maybe Hoffman was talking to him. That would explain the beer, the long time they were in the house together, and the easy knifing."

Shayne said, "Maybe the guy came back, sneaked into Schreiber's house, heard us talking, and killed Schreiber. But—"

"Look, Mike. Maybe it is the right explanation," Rolf said. "Maybe this Tomashek came down, Hoffman talked, and then the guy got the drop on him. That would explain why there was no fight. He stabbed suddenly. It would explain no prints, too. If you have a man covered you can wear gloves!"

"But Schreiber just about said that the Zahn girl had called and told them Tomashek would be out of the Waldorf and at a dinner just tonight! She must have known. So he couldn't have been in Miami."

"Unless he planned to attend that dinner, then gave her the slip and came down here," Rolf said. "A dinner he was supposed to go to would be a hell of a good cover, make her drop her guard. Maybe he came back to kill them all!"

"Or the Zahn girl could even be in on it!" Shayne said as he tugged furiously on his earlobe.

"She could," Rolf said.

Baltimore had been passed, and the lights of Philadelphia were just ahead now. The jet was not crowded on the night flight, most of the passengers sleeping as they winged back to New York with their fine Florida tans.

Shayne looked out the window. Rolf was silent also for a time. Then the lieutenant spoke. "I still don't like it."

"No," Shayne said. "There's something wrong. This Tomashek would have to have planned it all before he came, but the way I hear the story, Tomashek didn't know they were on to him."

Rolf shook his head. "You can't say that for sure. A good blackmailer knows all he can about his victims. What I don't like is you sitting outside Hoffman's house all those hours and not hearing anything! I mean, if a man faces a

blackmailer there should be an argument, loud voices, something! The way the Hoffman thing went it sounds like two good friends talking!"

Shayne nodded. "That's what's been worrying me. They all assume it was this Tomashek, yet the Zahn woman did not warn them he was out of New York. Unless she warned Hoffman alone."

Rolf swore softly. "Damn. I guess we better wait until we talk to Ahoova Zahn."

Shayne nodded. The two men lapsed into the silence of their own doubts. New York lay below now, and the jet circled in its holding pattern. But traffic was relatively light at this late hour, and the jet soon moved into its approach. It came down low across Jamaica Bay and touched down. Lieutenant Raggazzo of the New York police was waiting to meet the two men.

"We've got Miss Zahn at Headquarters, Lieutenant Rolf," Raggazzo said. The swarthy New York detective greeted Shayne warmly. They had met before on a case. "Hello, Shayne. Nice to see you again."

"Hello, Raggazzo. Did you learn anything from the woman?"

"Not a thing yet, but maybe we don't know what to ask," Raggazzo said. The dark New Yorker grinned. "And she's not exactly a woman, Shayne. She's a doll!"

"You always had an eye," Shayne said.

"Well, maybe you boys better give me the story on the way. Then I'll fill you in."

Rolf gave Raggazzo the sequence of events as they had happened in Miami. The New York detective listened carefully, then frowned. He admitted that Tomashek could have done the killings —jet service between New York and Miami made the distance only a matter of a few hours now. But he also had doubts.

"This Tomashek is an odd one," Raggazzo explained. "Full name is Dimitri Tomashek, man about fifty. He's a Russian. Official trip here, too. He's a member of a culture mission from East Germany, Poland and Russia. Between you and me and the CIA, he's not much of a culture mission type. A soldier if I ever saw one. CIA thinks he's secret police. You know, one of the watchdogs they send with their missions."

"That explains it," Shayne said to Rolf. "I mean why they couldn't get to him when they located him in Berlin. He was in East Berlin! So they waited until he came out. Just a coincidence he came to New York, Fred. They'd have gone for him no matter where he went outside the Curtain countries."

Rolf nodded. "But, damn it, an official mission member? How could he slip away?"

Raggazzo scratched his jaw. "Well, we give them good security, sure. But you know security, Rolf.

I mean, we give them guards, we keep the crowds away, we screen who gets near them—but we don't watch *them* too close. I mean, we guard them, we don't guard others from them. I suppose if this Tomashek really wanted to slip away he could have done it."

"Well," Rolf said, "we'll have to talk to him. I suppose he's got immunity? But we can talk to him at least."

"When we find him," Raggazzo said.

In the police car there was a silence so deep it had snow on it. Shayne and Rolf both looked at Raggazzo. The swarthy New York detective shrugged.

"Your call came after that dinner. He never showed at the dinner. We've got an APB out, but no luck so far. State Department is having a fit. So are his people."

"Bauer and Andric?" Shayne asked.

"Nothing on them either. A check showed they came in on a Miami jet all right. The stewardess identified the pics Gentry wired up. But they've vanished."

"What happened to Tomashek? He was guarded, wasn't he?" Rolf said.

"Yes and no. I mean, he's not Castro or Kosygin. We've got their rooms guarded, and the Waldorf, and the dinner. But we had no one in his car. There were supposed to be three of them in the car. When we found the car it was empty. We found the other two who were with him all tied up in the hotel! It looks like your Bauer and Andric had the place well cased."

"If it was them," Rolf said. "Maybe Tomashek faked it so he could get at them!"

"Damn!" Shayne said. "Let's get down to Headquarters fast! That Zahn woman is our only chance now!"

Raggazzo spoke to his driver. The driver stepped on the gas pedal and the siren began to scream as the police car raced down Park Avenue in the late night traffic of the city.

Shayne sat back and tugged on his left earlobe furiously. It looked like he was too late. If he was, then there would be more murder done this night. The question was, who would be killed? There was still a lot that Shayne did not like about the whole affair.

One of the mysteries was the three missing women. Had Bauer and Andric brought their women? Were they all planning an escape, to start still a third life with Tomashek out of their way?

There were too many questions. Ahoova Zahn was the only chance.

XI

THE GIRL was very young, no more than eighteen. And she was all that Raggazzo said she was. She was small, dark, and more than beautiful. Her olive face was a deli-

cate oval, her features small and perfect, her skin as smooth as satin. She filled her simple dress at every curve with something to spare.

But her eyes were neither young nor delicate. They were hard eyes, strong and deadly. She was not easily intimidated.

"All right, Miss Zahn. Where are they?" Lieutenant Raggazzo said in the interrogation room at New York Police Headquarters.

"Where are who?" the girl said. "I would like to know why I am here, and what charge you're making?"

"Come on, Miss Zahn," Raggazzo said. "We know you came to New York with Saul Hoffman. We know you've been in contact with Bauer and Andric, and we know you've been watching Dimitri Tomashek. You might as well tell us the rest."

Miss Zahn arched her fine eyebrows. "You know? How do you know? That I arrived with Mr. Saul Hoffman, I admit. But the rest? How can you possibly know anything?"

"Morris Schreiber told us, Miss Zahn," Shayne said quietly. "He told us that you were watching Tomashek, that you called to tell them about the dinner tonight where Tomashek could be found unguarded."

"Schreiber?" Miss Zahn said.

"He's dead, Miss Zahn," Rolf said. "Just like Hoffman."

The woman blinked. She paled. Apparently she had not known that Schreiber was dead. She opened her mouth as if to say something, then closed it again and sat silent.

Shayne watched her. "You're surprised, Miss Zahn? You didn't know that Tomashek had given you the slip again?"

"I have nothing to say," the girl said.

"But you were watching Tomashek," Raggazzo said. "You know where Bauer and Andric have him."

The girl was stony-faced. "I know nothing."

Shayne studied her. "You watched Tomashek. You're wondering now how he could have eluded you and gone down to Miami again to kill Schreiber. Perhaps he didn't, Miss Zahn. Perhaps he didn't kill anyone, not even Hoffman."

The beautiful face of the girl twitched as she sat there in the interrogation room. A muscle at the corner of her mouth jerked in a

spasm, and her eyes flickered, but she said nothing.

Shayne leaned close to her. "What if Tomashek didn't kill anyone, Miss Zahn? Then what are you doing? Are you sure he killed Hoffman? It is Hoffman you were with, right? You liked Saul Hoffman?"

The girl sat rigid. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"But you do, don't you? You've wondered all along how Tomashek could have gotten away from you to kill Hoffman. Now you're even more puzzled about how he could have killed Schreiber. Well, perhaps he didn't. You know what that will do to Bauer and Andric if they kill Tomashek?"

Miss Zahn let her eyes turn sharply toward Shayne. Then she turned away again. She remained speechless.

"Even if he did kill Hoffman and Schreiber," Shayne went on, "think of what Bauer and Andric are doing. They are worried about Tomashek ruining their lives. If they murder him they'll ruin themselves far worse. If Tomashek killed Hoffman and Schreiber, the law will take care of him. But what if he didn't kill anyone?"

In the silent interrogation room they all stood and watched the beautiful girl. She moved her head as if trying to clear it. Slowly she let her glance look at each of them in turn.

Shayne could see by her eyes the struggle that was going on in her mind. She was loyal. Hoffman had been murdered. She hated Tomashek. If she told anything, then she could hurt her friends. And yet, there were doubts in her mind. For the first time her stonelike expression softened.

"Who else could have done it?" she said. "He has been bleeding them all for so many years. "And —" she looked straight at Mike Shayne—"this will surprise you! Saul Hoffman was my uncle. That's not his real name. I've no parents; they were killed in a concentration camp. Uncle Saul has always taken care of me. For half my life we've traveled the world looking for Tomashek. It had to be he who did it!"

Shayne's bushy eyebrows lifted. He fingered his left earlobe. "Perhaps no one else," he said. "Maybe it is Tomashek, but we've got to stop them from doing something they'll regret later. You can't kill without regret."

She was silent. But even she knew that she had said enough already.

She had admitted what she knew, what was going to happen. Shayne gave a final push.

"There can't be much time, Miss Zahn," Shayne said.

She seemed to shiver. "Cabin, at Center Moriches on Long Island. It is a cabin Manfred Bauer used in the past for fishing. They will take him there. It is to be an accident, a drowning."

"How much start do they have?" Rolf snapped.

"Perhaps two hours," the girl said.

"Just about time to get that far," Raggazzo said. "We can take a helicopter and pretty near catch up to them."

Shayne turned and started for the door. "Come on, then."

Rolf and Raggazzo followed the red-head.

In the corridor they headed for Raggazzo's office. Once in the office. Raggazzo ordered a helicopter. He instructed his assistant to call Riverhead and tell the Suffolk County police to cover the cabin, once they located it.

"The cabin used by Manfred Bauer," Raggazzo told his sergeant. "Tell them—"

"To cover, but try not to be seen," Shayne said.

Rolf swore. "They could kill him at any time, Mike!"

Shayne nodded. "I know, but if they've taken him out there, they probably won't do anything right away. Not if they're arranging an accident, a drowning. That must take time."

Raggazzo was unsure. "If they know we're on to them, they'll give up, Shayne."

"Maybe and maybe not. We can't take the chance yet. Look, they've got him out there. They think they have time. They want to make it an accident. If they spot the police they just might give it all up and let him go. On the other hand they might panic and kill him right then. They might kill him quickly and say to hell with it. The man has been blackmailing them for twenty years; he killed two of their friends. That's what they think."

Raggazzo and Rolf were silent for a moment. They were policemen, and they did not like the idea of sitting and hoping that a killing would not take place. On the other hand they did not want to be the cause of a murder. They were still considering the problem when the door to Raggazzo's office was flung open and an irate, grey-haired man strode in, followed by two uniformed policemen who were trying to stop him.

"What's this all about!" the grey-haired man roared. "What has happened? Look, this note I find in his room! He is defecting; he is asking asylum and hiding!"

The three policemen read the note. It said exactly that. Tomashek was defecting, going into hiding. The three looked at each other. It was obvious that the note was intended to give an excuse for the disappearance of Tomashek, and his eventual death. Shayne tugged on his earlobe. Rolf looked at the note again.

"If we weren't so close behind them," Rolf said, "it might have been a damned good plan. Who would have known?"

"They don't know how close we

are," Shayne said. "They don't know that we even know about Miss Zahn. They'll feel safe."

Raggazzo nodded. "Okay, we play it quiet. I'll tell the sergeant what to say to Suffolk County. I just hope we make it in time."

The grey-haired man roared again. "What is happening? Where is Tomashek? I will report this to Washington! I will—"

"Easy, Mr. Kachek. We'll explain it all later. Sergeant, fill the consul in," Raggazzo said. "Tell him we may have some good news for him before the day is over."

And the swarthy New York policeman led the way out of his office toward the elevator that led up to the heliport on the roof of the building.

Moments later Shayne, Rolf and Raggazzo were flying out across the East River toward the distant Center Moriches.

XII

THE CABIN was set on a high sand dune that sloped down to the beach and the sea. There was nothing near it or around it but open sand. The lights were on, and two small spotlights were set at the corners and lighted front and back in the night.

"We've been here about forty minutes," Jim Jonson, captain of State police said. "We were real careful, they haven't seen. I figure they only got to the cabin about twenty minues before we arrived. It's been pretty quiet."

"You think Tomashek is still alive?" Raggazzo said.

"If he was alive when we got here, the place has been real quiet," the captain said.

The three men and the State troopers were all crouched low behind a dune some twenty-five yards away from the cabin. Shayne noted that the troopers had all the escape routes covered. But it was as close as they could get without almost certainly being seen. Captain Jonson waved his hand as if reading Shayne's thoughts.

"It's wide open all the way," Jonson said. "With those damned spots people put on their cabins we'd be as clear as sitting ducks in the sun."

Shayne looked around. The captain was right. Then the red-head looked again. "Where's the car?"

"Back up the road about five-hundred yards," Jonson said. "They can't drive any closer without sand tires. There was no blood in the car, no suggestion of violence."

"There wouldn't be," Rolf said. "They plan to drown him and make it look accidental."

Shayne continued to study the area. There were other cabins, not too close but close enough to be seen. They were all dark at this late night hour, but they had those outside spots that the people in the area seemed to favor. Probably

they felt nervous in such an isolated sand dune area. There were cars parked back where the road ended.

"Everyone parks back from the beach," Shayne observed. His eyes were hard and narrowed as he looked at the three or four other cars. Most of them were parked alone at the end of small turn-offs from the actual road. But one, the nearest house to the cabin, had two cars parked in its turnoff. Shayne stared at it.

"Yeah," Captain Jonson said. "They made a pact, I think. No driveways, spoil the beach frontage. They're mostly rustic out at this spot—fishing, camping, some artist types."

Shayne nodded, but his steely grey eyes were still looking at the turnoff with the two cars. He felt something odd about the two cars. He turned to Raggazzo and Rolf.

"We can't get close without being seen," Shayne said slowly. "But we can't wait too long."

"For all we know it could be too late already," Raggazzo said.

"It could be, but I think not. There's a lot of years of hate here, but there was some kind of friendship before that, and if I know human beings Bauer and Andric will have a lot to talk out of their systems."

"They had the whole drive out here," Rolf pointed out.

"Maybe, but I think they would have been too worried and careful to talk much then," Shayne said. "Still, the question is, what do we do? If we charge they might well panic. If they see police they might. No one can get close without being spotted."

"What do you have in mind, Shayne?" Raggazzo said.

Shayne pulled his earlobe slowly. "They know me. Whether they wanted me in the case or not, they know Alicia Bauer is my client. There's a good chance they wouldn't panic if they saw just me. They wouldn't know how much I knew or what I wanted. With no police to alarm them, they wouldn't be sure anyone knew anything. It's possible Alicia Bauer told me about the cabin, and I just put two and two together and came alone to find out what was up. They probably don't even know for sure that Schreiber is dead, or that I know it."

"Go on," Rolf said.

"I think our best chance is for me to go in alone," Shayne said. "Just walk up as if I had tracked them but had no idea what was going on. Just walk right up looking curious, play an act of just looking for Bauer."

"You can't be sure they wouldn't panic even then," Raggazzo said.

"No, I can't be, but I think it's our only chance," Shayne said.

There was a silence. In the dark night of the low sand dunes the wind blew the long grass. Raggazzo spoke to the State police captain.

"This is the captain's jurisdiction," Raggazzo said. "It's up to him."

Captain Jonson frowned. "I don't know enough about the whole affair, Lieutenant. But I'll say this. We can't get to that cabin without being spotted, and if Shayne thinks that will panic them, then his way is the only way."

Raggazzo nodded. "Okay, Shayne. But be careful. Keep loose as hell, and if they look cross-eyed, hit the dirt and we'll open up."

Shayne nodded grimly. He had no desire to be a dead hero.

"If I make it and get inside. Don't make a move, not a head up over the dune, until I signal one way or the other. Unless, of course, you hear shots."

They all nodded. Mike Shayne crouched down. His scalp wound pained a little. He checked his automatic. Then he put it back into his shoulder holster and crawled away from the cabin in the night toward the path that led from the road and the parked car which was out of sight from the cabin. He passed the parked car and went all the way back to where the police had left their cars so as not to be heard approaching. He got into a police car and told the trooper to drive slowly up behind the car already parked in the turnoff.

It would not look authentic unless they heard a car come up. When he got to the turnoff, he left the police car and began to walk slowly along the path, looking around as if he had just arrived.

He was walking in this manner when he came slowly over the last dune and in sight of the cabin. He walked like a man who was surprised to be where he was, and who was looking around for someone he knew.

He noted the faint movement at the cabin window.

They were watching him. He continued his easy walk straight to the cabin as if totally unaware that there were two desperate men inside. His expression was one of curiosity only. His quick eyes noted the door opening a crack as he approached it. Tensed, he walked up to the door and raised his hand to knock.

The door opened.

"Come in, Mr. Shayne," the voice of Manfred Bauer said.

Shayne stepped into the cabin.

There was only one light on. The window shades were drawn. It was a small cabin, almost empty of all but some rustic chairs and a table.

Bauer stood behind the door, holding his Luger. Andric was across the room at the window looking out. There was a pistol in the crippled man's hand too. Two doors led into the bedrooms. They were closed now.

"He's alone, Manfred," Andric said.

Shayne was looking at the third man. He was a short, broad man almost as wide in the shoulders as

Shayne himself while being at least eight inches shorter. He had a thick neck and a bullet head shaven in the Russian style. His eyebrows were bushy, and his face strong and shadowed with blue beard. His eyes were both angry and scared. He was tied to a chair.

Shayne nodded to the bound man. "You want to tell me about this, Bauer?"

"How did you get here?" Andric snapped.

"I put two and two together and did some guessing," Shayne said. "That's my job, Andric. I'm pretty good at it."

"Two and two?" Bauer said nervously.

Shayne shrugged as if it had been obvious. "I talked to Natalie Schreiber. She said you all had a plan of some kind, some plan that excited you and was created after Hoffman arrived. You were oiling your guns. Hoffman had an arsenal. Then you vanished suddenly. It didn't take much guessing to know you were on your plan. I checked the airport and got the New York destination. Alicia told me about this cabin."

"You shouldn't have come here, Shayne," Bauer said. "Now we will have to kill you too!"

XIII

THE MAN tied to the chair stared at Shayne. Andric nodded as he watched the big detective.

"There is no other way. We are not connected to Tomashek. We cannot be. No one up to now knows that we have him, no one must ever know."

Shayne watched them closely. So far they did not know how wrong they were. They had no idea, apparently, that they had left a trail a child could follow. But that did not matter now. Now it was his job to prevent somehow the death of anyone.

"Why kill any one?" Shayne said. "What good is it? You won't get away with it in the end. You know that. Nothing could be important enough to you to make murder the way."

Andric snarled. "What do you know? How can you know what we must do?"

"We have thought long, Mr.

Shayne," Manfred Bauer said. "We must do what we must do. This animal must die. It is the only way, believe me! It was the only way even before he killed Hoffman. Now we have that crime to avenge also."

"You're sure?" Shayne said.

"We are sure," Bauer said, and the bearded man looked coldly at the bound Tomashek.

The bullet-headed Russian's voice was shaky but still strong as he spoke low. "They are crazy, you understand? I told them they are crazy!"

"Shut up!" Andric snapped. "You have no right to speak now, Dimitri!"

Mike Shayne rubbed his chin.

"Why don't you tell me about it?" the red-head said to Bauer. "If you tell me about it all, maybe I can show you how wrong you are."

"Words!" Andric cried. "Too many words! Time is—"

The bearded Bauer stared at Shayne. "No," he said. "Let us tell him. Yes, I want him to know. Tell him, Jacob."

Andric shrugged. "Tell him yourself. I am done with words."

Bauer nodded and began to pace the silent cabin. Shayne glanced at the closed bedroom doors. His mind was still thinking about the two cars parked in the nearest turnoff to the cabin. The doors were still closed. Manfred Bauer began to talk.

"It was during the Second World War," Bauer said, his eyes glazed as if reliving those terrible days. "We are all Russians, Ukrainians. We were in a prison camp. Political prisoners, all of us. We had survived the purges of the Thirties, but not completely. We were all young, and we were not killed or imprisoned then, but we were watched.

"Five of us. A young teacher: myself. A student engineer: Andric there. A son of a merchant: Schreiber. An apprentice gem cutter: Hoffman. Our real names do not matter."

Bauer looked at Tomashek in the chair. "Then there was him, Dimitri Tomashek, also a teacher. But we were very young and we were not touched until the war came. Then we were picked up and we all ended up in a labor camp in the Ukraine. That was where we met, the five of us.

"The Germans advanced. We knew that the war was not going well. We learned that the guards had orders to move us East if the Germans came too close, or shoot us if there was no time. We—"

Shayne broke in. "How did you learn about that? About the plans for you if the Germans got too close?"

Bauer blinked. "How? I don't—wait, yes! It was Tomashek. Yes, Dimitri learned about it!"

"All right," Shayne said. "Go on."

The doors to the bedrooms were still closed.

Bauer ran his fingers through his beard as he talked. "We planned an escape. It would not have succeeded if the Germans had not been so near. As it was, the camp was in confusion, almost panic. I think they would have shot us the next day. But we succeeded in making our escape at night."

"Tomashek was with you?" Shayne asked.

"Yes, Dimitri led us through the wire," Bauer said, looking at the pinioned Russian. "That is why we—but I get ahead of my story. After we made our escape we traveled across the country. There were partisan units operating, and we knew that we would be shot on sight. But we remained out of sight for some days, living like animals but together, sleeping in each others' arms at night to keep from freezing as winter was coming on. Never have five men lived and suffered so closely as we did that week! Never! And then—"

Bauer stopped, his entire body shaking with some strong passion as he looked at Tomashek. But he regained control and went on. "Finally we managed to reach the German lines and pass through. We were very lucky; we all survived. The Germans were suspicious, but our stories were plausible. They captured the prison camp not long after and records tended to confirm that we had been prisoners and were telling the truth.

"Also, fortunately, we all happened to come from homes that were now behind German lines. The Germans kept us locked up for some time while they checked our stories. You see, they wanted anti-Soviet Russians at the time, for propaganda purposes. Well, they finally checked our stories, and for two years we worked for the Germans as a team.

"After the two years, the Germans obviously losing the war, it all changed. Everyone seemed to go crazy. They trusted no one. They suddenly charged us with being spies all along. We became very worried. We even heard they suspected a spy among us! On top of that, it was by then clear that the Germans would lose the war. The Soviets would win, and we all knew what that would mean.

"The Communists keep good records of such things as the escape of political prisoners. They would check after the war for men like us. It would mean certain death if they found us. On top of that, even if we reached the British or Americans, as Russians, we would almost certainly be sent to Russia!

"It was Hoffman who found the answer. In the confusion of the time, we were always afraid, our work was over. One day we were put to work burning documents, the papers and files of the victims of the Nazi concentration camps. Hoffman came across the papers of the real Saul Hoffman. The real Dutchman had died in Belsen.

"The idea took hold of Hoffman at once: both men had been gem cutters, their pictures were similar, and Hoffman had learned some Dutch while we worked in Germany. He took the papers and hid them and began to work very hard on his Dutch.

"The rest of us spoke good German by now. We began to look for papers of dead men that would fit us. It took some months, but we all found them. I found Manfred Bauer, an Austrian. Andric found a real Andric. We picked men as much like ourselves as possible, learned all we could from their official papers, and trusted to the confusion that would follow the war, especially in Germany."

Bauer stopped and a bitter look went across his face. He looked hard at Dimitri Tomashek. "We all had our plans ready, including Tomashek there, when he suddenly vanished. The Nazis arrested him, we never knew why. Of course we considered that he was killed. We thought that for two years."

Bauer shrugged. "The rest is simple. We managed to get here to the States and start new lives, all but Hoffman. His wife had died, he decided to return to Amsterdam as Hoffman and take up his old profession. No members of the real Hoffman's family, or relatives were in Holland then. We thought it was over, our papers had checked, we were safe. Then the letters began."

Bauer stared at Tomashek. "He did not even hide who he was! He signed the letters. He demanded money to be quiet. What could we do? Exposure would mean deportation—and to Russia! We had entered America illegally. We could not even prove we were not criminals but political prisoners. So we paid. We paid, and paid, and paid. Oh, he was clever. He never asked too much.

"We paid and paid, but we also sent Hoffman to try to find him. We supported Hoffman while he searched. All of us took trips to places the letters had come from to see if we could find him, but we never did. Until Berlin—and we found him safe, still a Soviet citizen, and using his own name! The rest you know, or have guessed. He came here; he found out we were after him. He killed Hoffman! Now we'll kill him! He will not destroy us!"

There was silence. Shayne noted that the door to the far bedroom was suddenly open a crack. The red-head did not look at the door. Instead he looked at Bauer.

"He killed Schreiber, too," Shayne said. "Don't forget that."

Andric and Bauer both stared at Mike Shayne, their mouths open.

XIV

"DIDN'T YOU know that Schreiber was dead?" Shayne asked.

The two men stared, shook their

heads slowly. Andric swore and started toward Tomashek. Bauer held up his hand, stopped Andric, looked at Shayne.

"When? When was Morris killed? How?" Bauer said, astonished.

"He was killed late yesterday afternoon, almost in the evening. He was shot while he was holding me to keep me from following you." Shayne took off his panama to show his thick bandage. "I was shot, too. Why would Tomashek shoot me?"

"Yesterday evening?" Bauer said.

Andric had stopped, had turned to stare at Mike Shayne.

"But—" Andric said.

"Yes," Shayne said, "but!"

The red-head turned to Dimitri Tomashek. "Did you kill Hoffman or Schreiber?"

"No!" the Russian croaked. "Why should I kill them?"

Andric screamed. "Liar! Twenty years you have been bleeding us! Making our lives a living hell! You damned—"

Bauer said, "Shut up!"

Andric shut up. Manfred Bauer looked at Tomashek.

"You did not kill them? You have not been blackmailing us all these years, Dimitri?"

The Russian laughed. "Why should I blackmail you? What would I do with such money? I am a Soviet official!"

Shayne stepped in closer, alert, but speaking quietly. He was very aware of the bedroom door that was open a crack. He spoke to Tomashek. "Are you a member of the Soviet secret police? It's very important, Tomashek."

The Russian nodded. "Yes, I am. And I can prove it."

Shayne looked at Bauer and Andric. "Do you think that an escaped political prisoner, one who had worked with the Germans, could become a member of the Soviet secret police?"

Bauer answered. "No, he could not. Then—"

Tomashek laughed a short, harsh laugh. "Of course! I was always a member of the secret police. I was planted with you four so I could get into Germany. I was a Soviet spy all along. After the war, after I survived, I went home. That is all. Why would I blackmail you four? You had served your purpose. Why would we want you back? Do you know what would happen to me if I was ever caught blackmailing you?"

Shayne said, "Can you prove you didn't kill Hoffman or Schreiber?"

"Hoffman I would not know, but they both are sure I was in New York all last evening, all yesterday! I have proof of that." And Tomashek laughed again. "How did you all think you escaped so easily from our prison camp? How did you know you had to escape? I arranged it all, of course. You were

perfect cover to get me to the Germans and make my story seem more true. It worked, yes! Those Germans always were stupid."

Bauer and Andric had heard none of this. The two men were looking at each other, then at Mike Shayne. They were very pale. It was Bauer who said it.

"But who then? Twenty years? No one else knew. Only the five of us," Bauer said, stammered.

"Are you sure?" Shayne said. "What about your wife, Bauer? Your daughter Alicia?"

"No, never! I never breathed a word of it!"

"Natalie Schreiber?" Shayne said.

"No," Andric said. "I think not. Morris always said she did not know. No, not Natalie or Alicia, but I told—"

The bedroom door opened behind Shayne. Helga Andric stepped out. The tall woman held a pistol trained on Mike Shayne and Manfred Bauer.

They all stared at her. It was obvious that none of them had known she was inside the cabin. Her eyes were cold and yet fanatic.

"For us, Jacob!" she cried. "I did it for us! I have all the money. In banks, all safe. You were the one who was crippled! You suffered and they escaped unhurt! They became rich while we lived on hand-outs, charity! Well, now we are rich. Now we have all that money hidden, and—"

"You, Helga! All these . . . years," Andric stammered.

Helga Andric laughed. "It was so easy. All those trips I had to take for you, Jacob. It was so easy just to fly to another city and pick up the money at General Delivery. I knew many people from the trips, it was so easy to have them pick up a letter for me! But then Hoffman had to find Tomashek at last!"

The woman's eyes blazed with anger. "I was sure he was dead! You all said he was dead! I couldn't let you talk to him! If he ever convinced you he did not write those blackmail letters! No, I could not let Hoffman or any of you get to Tomashek."

"You killed them? Both of them?" Andric said.

The woman shrugged. "Schreiber was going to tell Mr. Shayne too much. I thought I had killed Shayne, too! Hoffman I killed because I thought that would stop you. I did not know about the Zahn woman. I thought if I killed Hoffman you would not find Tomashek."

Andric hardly heard. "All these years? Twenty years of blackmail. You killed them both?"

"For us, Jacob! We're rich! All we have to do is kill the three of them, make it look like they shot each other, that way—"

Shayne inched away, lowered his shoulder. Her pistol swung toward him. He stopped. "The police are all around, Mrs. Andric. You

can't get away now. They'll be in at the first shot."

"Police?" the woman said. Then she smiled a shrewd smile. "So much the better. They don't know I'm even in here. No one does! Jacob! We kill them, wound you, and the police will be sure you all shot each other. I'll hide under the house; there is a door down—"

The single shot rang out in the cabin. The woman was hurled back against the wall. Her eyes stared at her husband. The pistol in Jacob Andric's hand was still pointed at his wife.

Andric shot again. The woman bounced off the wall and fell dead on her face.

"Twenty years of hell," Andric said.

Shayne walked toward the door to open it and let the police come into the now silent cabin. Tomashek sat still tied to the chair, looking at the dead woman.

Bauer turned away. Rolf and Raggazzo led the police into the cabin. Mike Shayne began to tell them the whole astonishing story of Helga Andric, the blackmailer and killer.

NEXT MONTH'S HEADLINER

●

THE UNSEEN MAN

Deep in the Florida backlands, a little band of fighting men was waiting the signal to go back to Cuba. And to Mike Shayne, their leader said, "There is a traitor among us, Shayne. Stop him before he can get back to Castro. If you don't, we will all die. And you as well. Fidel knows how to take care of foes!"

A Complete Mike Shayne Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY

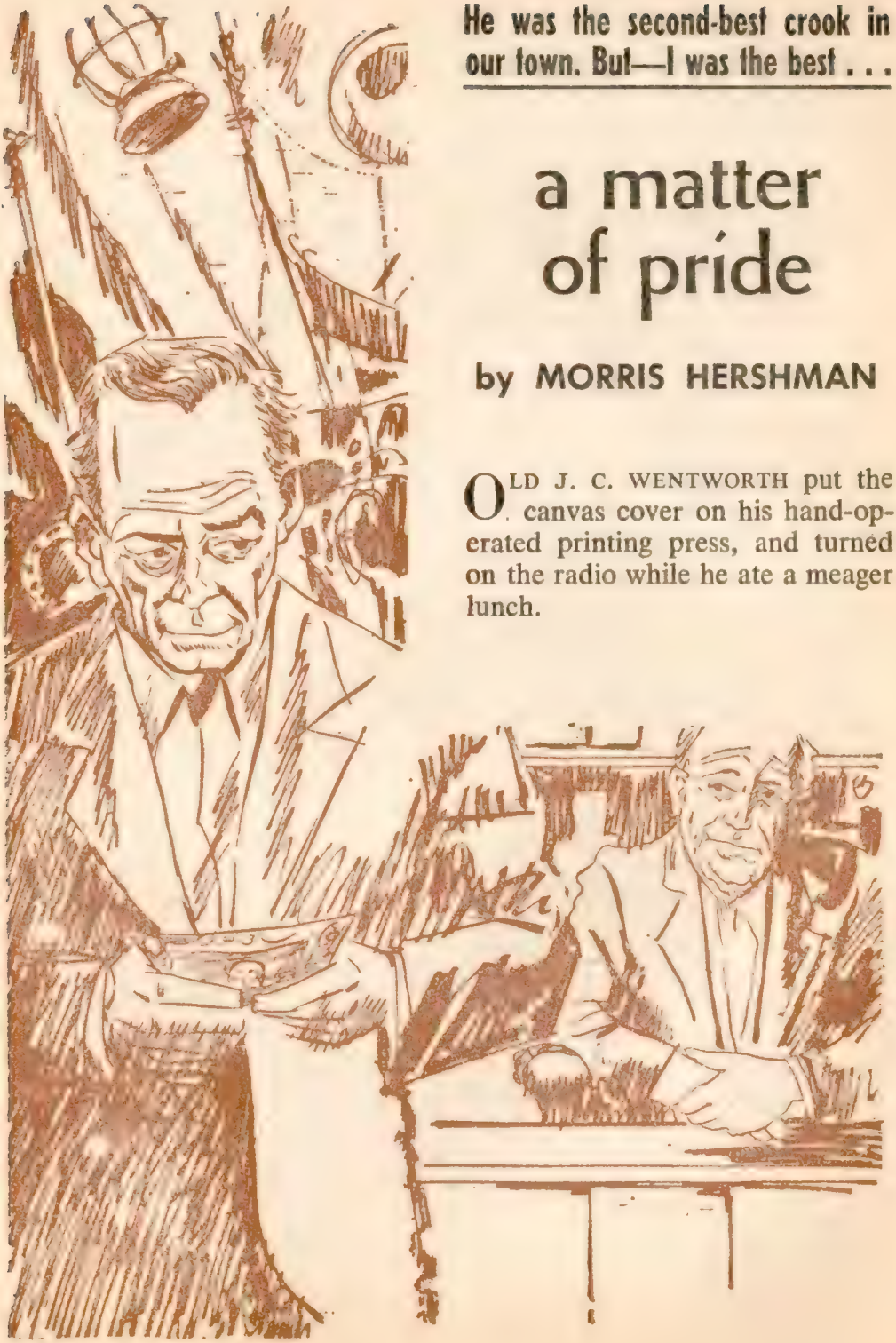
●

HIS WIFE, SHARON, SURVIVES by WALTER SNOW

THE RED KNIFE by NORMAN DANIELS

THE MISSING BODY by ARTHUR PORGES

THE JET KILLERS by MAX VAN DERVEER



He was the second-best crook in our town. But—I was the best . . .

a matter of pride

by MORRIS HERSHMAN

OLD J. C. WENTWORTH put the canvas cover on his hand-operated printing press, and turned on the radio while he ate a meager lunch.

According to the newscast, a counterfeiting operation had been uncovered, and the criminals had caused some stores in town to lose several hundred thousand dollars.

"Wish I could do the same to Harry Markel," J.C. muttered under his breath.

Markel ran a curiosity shop and thought of himself as a greater authority on the Civil War than old J.C. The two men had argued about such matters as the legends on the Confederacy's 8% bonds and the Hoyer and Ludwig bills in Richmond, Virginia. The two men had re-fought the Battle of Gettysburg with models and had nearly got into another battle on the side.

It gave J.C. an idea. An engraver friend had given him duplicate plates of Confederate money for a special kind of greeting card, as well as plates of the 8% bonds and the shinplasters that were fractions of dollars which had been printed up because the South hadn't had enough metal to make coins. By the end of the war a Confederate dollar had been worth about twenty cents. As souvenirs, as curiosity shop items, they'd be worth much more.

Old J.C. went to work printing Confederate money so as to fool old Markel once and for all. He got to know the high, balding forehead and rimless glasses of Governor Letcher of Virginia on the Corporation of Richond bills as well as if it was the face in his mirror. He was adept at varying the backs of the Southern Rights Bank bills, some with lithographs of trains and steamships of milkmaids or Negroes working in the cotton fields.

He did have some genuine Civil War books and army procurement forms which he wasn't particularly anxious to get rid of, but which he decided he would add to what he now called "the pile". The bills had been artfully doctored to look aged, and it seemed to old J.C. that they'd pass muster anywhere.

He took a few enlistment posters with him as well and took a cab to go the six blocks to Markel's store. Old Markel, shifty and scrawny as ever, stood behind the counter and watched J.C. struggle with the box he was carrying.

"I've decided to get rid of this stuff," old J.C. growled. "Put a price on it."

"Four cents," Markel said promptly.

"You haven't even opened it yet, you old grampus."

Markel adjusted his eyeshade, which he always wore and which he considered gave him some resemblance to the Confederacy's Jeb Stuart. Then he stepped out from back of the counter and suspicously took out some of the contents of the box.

"So you want to sell this stuff, hey?" Markel's nostrils crinkled. "The bills smell like they've been kept in a jar of sodamints."

"They're genuine, aren't they?"

"Oh, I think they'll do."

Old J.C. felt himself expand physically when he heard that. He'd have given a great deal to simply tell the truth at this juncture, but he wanted to have definite proof that Markel had been taken in. Only the money itself, good U.S. money paid across the counter, would constitute proof that Markel couldn't every deny.

"What's your offer?" J.C. asked.

"I can't give too much," Markel began automatically.

"You're not giving at all; you're buying," J.C. pointed out.

"I'm buying Confederate money, though," Markel snapped. "I could get a lot more for samples of those counterfeit U.S. bills as are going around currently."

"How much?" J.C. probed. "Put your money where your mouth is."

"Twenty bucks."

It was rather more than J.C. had expected for the pile. He had figured that Markel would fob him off with five dollars or six. He found himself feeling a little sorry for having tried to put one over on the man and even sorrier for having succeeded.

Markel said, "I figure you wouldn't be unloading if you don't need the money bad. After all, you're as much of a Civil War nut as I am. So I figure you might as well have as much money as I can spare for it. Believe me, it's a good price."

"I know." For a moment old J.C. wished he *was* in desperate need or money. Markel had succeeded in making him feel like a criminal.

He took the money sadly, thanked Markel and left the store. Not till he purchased his evening's groceries did he realize that his esteem for Markel had been considerably premature.

The grocery clerk looked at a listing of counterfeit bills tacked on his cash register and said:

"Sorry, but this twenty, it's one of the counterfeits that've been going around lately."

That was when old J.C. realized that the dealer had indeed gotten the better of him. Markel had paid him off with a phony bill instead of handing it to the government inspectors as required! Markel must have known that the bills J.C. was offering could've been—hum!—improved on in some way and took this method to pay for them.

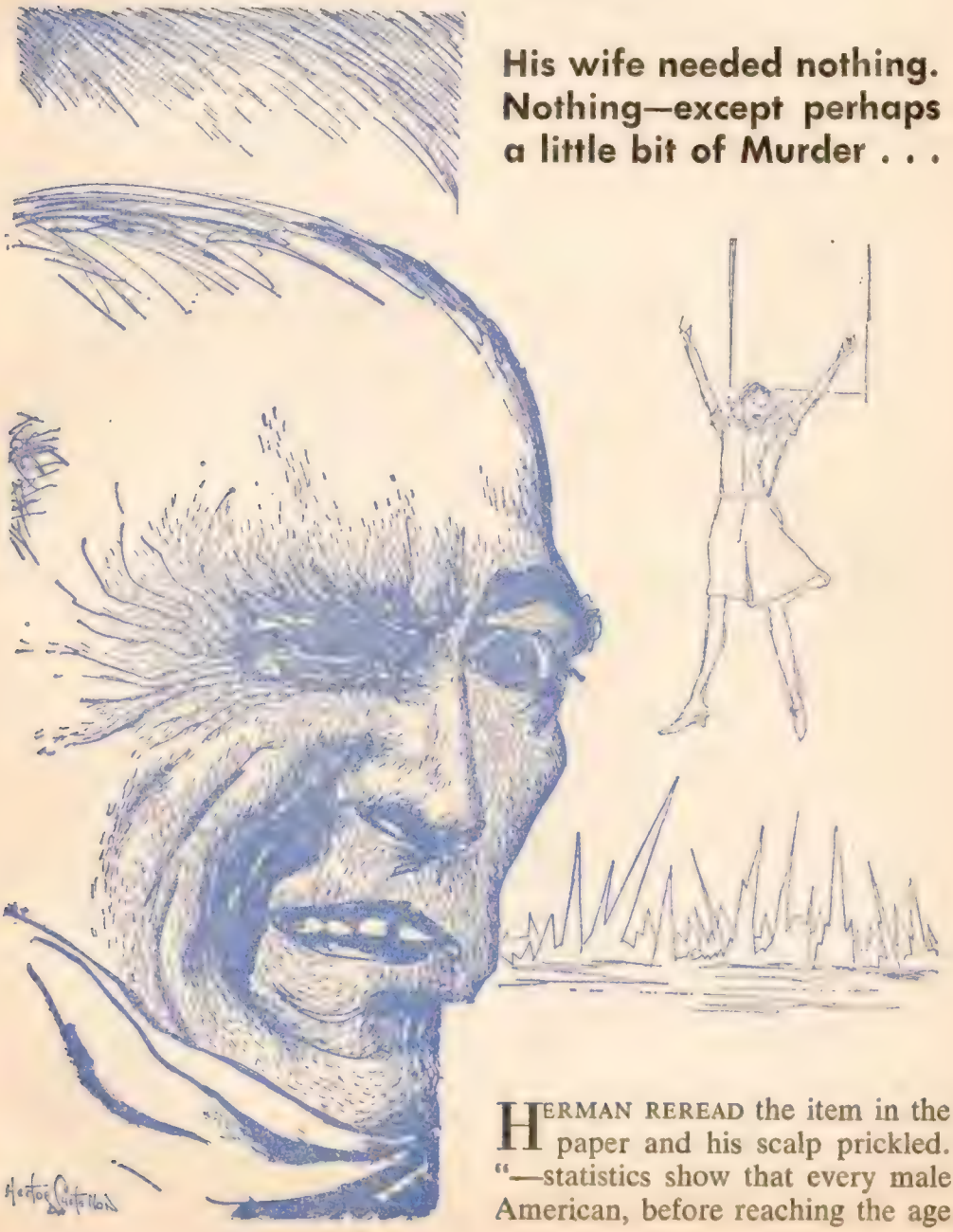
Meanwhile he himself would have memorabilia to offer for sale, provided he didn't want to—unkindest cut of all!—didn't want to keep it for himself and taunt J.C. with it in the future.

No, the feud was restored. In fact, it was hotter than ever.

"The rat, old J.C. thought, luxuriating in his newly-recovered dislike for the man as he paid for the groceries with a fifty dollar bill that was genuine. "The double-dyed rat!"

A MOMENT OF VIOLENCE

by BILL KRUGER



His wife needed nothing. Nothing—except perhaps a little bit of Murder . . .

HERMAN REREAD the item in the paper and his scalp prickled. "—statistics show that every male American, before reaching the age

of sixty-five, either becomes involved in, or exposed to, at least a moment of violence."

Funny he should read something like that at a time like this. He'd be sixty-five next week and he was waiting for something violent to happen—he was waiting for his wife to die a very violent death.

It seemed incredible that only a little over a year ago he had met Florie at the Single Social Club. Jack Striker had taken him along that night.

Jack was a lot older and had been a widower a lot longer but he still had a wish for the women.

"Don't tell me you don't feel like you're missing something on a cold winter night," Striker had kidded. "There's some fine, handsome women come to the club. Some are even quite young—grass widows, I s'pose."

That had been Florie. Handsome, young—only thirty-five—and twice a grass widow. They were married in Waukegan two weeks later. At the time he didn't figure he was such an old fool as some of his relatives had implied. She was no child, she knew the value of a dollar and she was a good housekeeper.

Was—until she started visiting that 'sick cousin' down in Chicago about three months ago. Then things started to go to pot. She wouldn't let him touch her, said she'd move into one of the spare bedrooms if he kept pestering her and she didn't even cook a decent meal or do much work in the greenhouse any more.

It didn't take him long to catch on, not after he found the cigar butts in the ashtray of her car.

"And what are you going to do about it, Hermie?" she had taunted him. "Going to divorce me and have to admit to everybody that you can't keep a woman happy? Admit, like your brother said, that you're just an old fool?"

She was right, too. He couldn't stand thinking about everybody laughing at him. That's when he decided he'd have to get rid of her in another way.

Naturally, his first thought had been about poison. He had plenty of that in the greenhouse. A few minutes of breathing in some soil fumigant or drinking some of that potent insecticide would do the job. Accidentally, of course.

That was one reason why he fired Ludwig, the handy man. He'd be able to fix up an accident a lot easier with nobody else around. Besides, it was time he was getting rid of the big stupe. The way he kept looking at Florie and the way she played up to him. This was too close to home.

Ludwig had been confused. "It means I can't sleep in the boiler room no more? But where I go, Mister Herman?" Ludwig hadn't been too mentally quick to begin with and when the old boiler had exploded a couple of years ago the

resultant head injury had battered his brain some more.

"I told you, Ludwig," Herman had explained. "I have to cut down on expenses. People aren't buying as many flowers from the shop as they used to. Now they put artificial flowers on the graves that last all year. Besides, the building inspector has been after me to get you out of the boiler room for a long time. Says it's not a place to sleep in."

But I'll hire him back, after, Herman decided. Couldn't get another man as stupid and as strong as that big ox, not for that kind of money.

He thought he heard a door open, upstairs, and he held his breath to listen. There were no footsteps along the hall, though, and he knew she was still in the bathroom. He settled back to wait.

He almost smiled as he thought about his conversation with Ludwig and about the building inspector. It was really the inspector who was responsible for the plan that was in motion now. Not directly, of course, but it was his written order that had started it all.

Ever since the city had adopted a more rigid building code the inspector had been after Herman to remove what he considered a hazard. This was a wooden stairway which led down from a door at the end of the hallway on the second floor of the house and ended up in the courtyard near the greenhouse entrance.

It had been there when Herman had bought the property many years before. The former owner had installed it so that when the alarm went off in the master bedroom, indicating that either the steam pressure was down or temperatures were too low in the greenhouse, he could go down the hallway, down the stairway and into the greenhouse without tracking through the house. And vice versa.

Herman didn't need that stairway anymore. Not since he had put in the automatic system after the old boiler blew up. But he reacted violently to the thought of what it would cost him to remove it.

"Mr. Varman," he had told the building inspector, "I'd have to hire a contractor to take that down. It's right over the end of the greenhouse and it'll take special equipment to get it down without breaking all of my sash lights."

"Exactly what I've been saying," Varman had caught him up. "It's a distinct hazard and has to go." This was when he had handed Herman the written order. "You have ten days to remove it."

That was nine days ago. Now the stairway was down and he was waiting for his plan to develop to its final, violent end. He looked at the clock on the shelf and decided to give her five minutes more.

He had been right about the cost of removal and he had still been boiling mad until the careless workman dropped the length of two by four the last thing. It had smashed more than a dozen lights and broken the sash above the propogating table.

As he had stood there, glaring up through the gaping hole at the sheepish-faced workman in the bucket on the end of the boom, he saw the door which now led to nowhere. This was when the plan had come to him.

After the contractor had taped a thin sheet of plastic over the hole he had again offered to nail the door shut. "Won't be able to get back for a day or two to finish the job."

Herman had been quite sharp with him. "Like I said before; this job is costing me enough the way it is. I want to get as much as I can for that door and that casing. Be sure your men take it out without wrecking it."

It was after they had all gone that he had set it up. He very carefully estimated where she would land when she stepped out of that doorway-to-nowhere. It would be right among the mum cuttings. He had picked out all of the sharpest and longest shards of glass from the shattered sash lights and planted them upright between the cuttings. He had read about the Viet Cong using sharpened bamboo and thought the idea would work right well here.

Florie had come back from Chicago after dark, as usual, and had driven right into the garage from the street. She came into the living room from the garage and went right upstairs without so much as a glance in Herman's direction. She had been gone since yesterday and couldn't know that the stairway was down.

Herman had bragged to her several times that they'd never make him take those stairs down, so when he received the written order he had said nothing to her nor had he told her about hiring a contractor. She would have just laughed at him.

He listened for sounds of movement from upstairs. By now she should have had all of her personal things washed out. She should be walking down the hallway toward the door. She always hung her stuff out on the little landing—said she liked the fresh air smell.

She also had a streak of prudery which didn't go with her promiscuousness at all. She wouldn't turn the hall light on because "when I open the door and there's a light behind me anybody down on the street could see right through me. Besides, I know the landing is

there and I can find the clothesline in the dark."

But tonight there is no landing he told her silently. And I've got to find out why you aren't doing what you usually do. Maybe I'll have to help you—give you a little shove.

Herman climbed the stairs slowly. As he approached the darkened bedroom door he called out sharply.

"Florie! What in the hell are you trying—"

A huge hand had him by the throat, cutting off his words and his breath. In the light from the stairwell he looked up into the tear-stained, wild-eyed face of Ludwig.

"Florie dead—Florie dead!" he babbled. "I sneak in to sleep in spare bedroom, I want talk to her. She going yell—I put hand over her face. She dead, she dead—"

But Herman never heard the last few words for he was dead too.

Ludwig let go of the limp body and ran down the hall. His thick fingers fumbled with the key. Finally, he got the door unlocked, flung it open and lunged out.

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A Taut Novelet of Suspense

THE COOL CHARACTER

Imogene Tracy had disappeared, vanished without a trace. Could we break that net of greed and hate and bring her back alive?

by MAX VAN DERVEER

MY PROSPECTIVE client nervously paced the carpeting of the suite he had taken at the Hotel Arnold. Tall, lanky, slightly stooped, and bald in middle age, he dressed like the wealth he was reputed to have accumulated.

His name was Tracy, and he was a familiar figure to those who read newspapers and viewed tevee. He was a United States Senator, an important civilian in the nation's space program, but that did not mean I had to accept him, his proposition, or his fee.

"Senator," I said, "no offense, but what you ask me to do has a distinct odor."

He stopped pacing. His mouth drew down. His stare pierced. Although it was cool in the air-conditioned suite, there was a sheen of perspiration on his narrow face. "Mr. Taylor, you have your money. Is it not enough?"

Yes, I had his money in hand. One thousand dollars, cash. A sheaf of one hundred dollar bills. When he had given it to me I'd had the sensation he was spending as if it was Uncle Sam's money. Then that thought had become swamped

by the feel of the sheaf. But there was a reservation.

I had been in the investigation business almost twelve years and never before had I been offered anything near one thousand dollars for a single stint of work. Too, I found it difficult to believe that what he wanted me to do was worth that much money. There had to be strings.

"Mr. Taylor?"

"Perhaps one thousand dollars is too much, sir. I am not a strong arm," I said. "I avoid physical fights. I don't care for violence. I have a license to carry a gun, but I seldom carry it. I—"

"Mr. Taylor," he interrupted crisply, "I am not asking you to be a strong arm for me. All I'm asking you to do is follow someone. Now, if it will ease your mind, if a smaller fee will convince you that I am sincere when I say that all I want to know is the destination of the person you will watch remove a suitcase from my car, that I am not interested in that person being maimed or shot or apprehended, that—"

"Are you being blackmailed, sir?"

Tracy drew a deep breath and extended his hand. "The money, Mr. Taylor? I see that I have selected the wrong man."

We measured each other then, our stares dueling, and it was as if I suddenly was alone with him in an empty, steel-walled room. Nothing except his narrowed eyes and hollowed face existed for me. There were no sounds, no odors. We might have been in a vacuum.

But I also snapped out of it fast. I stood and put his money inside my wallet. A thousand dollars is hard to come by in my business. The wallet was a bulky bulge when I returned it to my pocket and I found a certain pleasure in that bulge. The Senator arched an eyebrow as he continued to look on me.

"I'm suspicious by nature," I said, attempting to make the words convey nonchalance. "Write me off to caution, okay? It's why I am not a rich man, I suppose. I've never plunged."

It was his turn to make a decision, and he made it swiftly. He lowered the brow and his extended hand. "Perhaps we can now discuss details, Mr. Taylor?"

I attempted to ignore his sarcasm as I nodded.

"This afternoon," he said, clipping the words, "I'll leave the hotel at exactly one-forty-five. I have rented a car. It requires forty-five minutes in normal traffic to get to the supermarket. I've already made three dry runs and I haven't been off more than two minutes either way."

"I'll be behind you, Senator."

"The person you will want will remove the suitcase from my car in the market parking lot."

"Man or woman?"

"Man. All I want to know is his destination. I'll return here to my suite. As soon as you have the information, report by telephone. Your part in this will then be completed."

I nodded.

"And now," he said, "I'll leave so that you may exit. Give me five minutes before you depart."

It was the way I had come in. When he had telephoned my combination office-apartment earlier that Wednesday morning, he had said he had picked my name from the Yellow Pages. He had made his original pitch, and then he had asked me to come to the Arnold. He had said he would not be in his suite, but that the door would be unlocked and I was to enter. I had.

Tracy had arrived around five minutes later, presented his credentials, then told me he was being followed. He had said, "I don't want anyone to know about you. It was necessary for me to be away from the hotel when you arrived. I wanted my shadow with me. I didn't want him to see you."

Well, no one had seen me enter the room. Now no one was going to see me leave. I cracked the door cautiously, waited for a woman to move along the corridor, heard her enter a room, then I surveyed the empty corridor, stepped out, closed the door behind me and walked to the elevator.

I knew I should go to my friend,

Sergeant Gilbert Crocker at central police headquarters, but the bulge of the wallet against my hip managed to detour me. I just had time to lunch and stop at the bank before I was due to be inside my ancient sedan and outside the hotel again.

Senator Tracy walked out of the Arnold at exactly one-forty-five that afternoon. He carried the suitcase in his right hand. It did not seem to be too heavy for him as he turned down the sidewalk away from me, then got into a green sedan parked at the curbing. I kept at least one vehicle between us as I followed him out of the downtown district.

At an intersection three blocks from our destination the car between us turned right and I allowed another to pull away from the curbing and get into the traffic line. A red-haired woman was

driving and she also turned into the supermarket parking lot. I had an instant of misgiving when she braked in the stall to the left of Senator Tracy, but the feeling passed when she vacated her vehicle and marched past him and into the market.

I was braked in an open area two rows behind the green sedan and had a clear view. The parking slots immediately to my left and right were empty. I slouched behind the steering wheel and tipped my hat forward on my head as the Senator entered the market. I was attempting to give the appearance of being a weary husband waiting for a wife, but under the brim of my hat my eyes were slitted and I had the green sedan in plain sight. No one was going to approach it without being seen.

Cautiously, I looked around for the Senator's shadow and found none.

A fat man in a wrinkled suit came out of the supermarket. The warm July day seemed uncomfortable for him. He took out a handkerchief and swabbed his face as he waddled straight toward the green sedan.

I gripped the steering wheel and inched up in the seat. A few yards behind the fat man was the red-haired woman. She cradled a sack in the crook of her right arm, but it was the man who held my interest until he abruptly turned into a row of parked vehicles ahead of the Senator's rented car.

I let out a breath and watched the woman approach her car on short, quick steps. Her attire made me wonder how the housewife will dress twenty years in the future. She was heavily made up and she wore a man's white shirt outside tight blue stretch pants. The tail of the shirt bounced against her thighs, and when she dipped to put the sack on the passenger side of the front seat of her car I noticed the ragged hole in the side of her sneakers.

Suddenly she turned to the green sedan, took out the suitcase and stuffed it inside her car. Then she was around the front end and inside and moving almost before I jerked erect and started the sedan motor.

I eased out of the parking slot and along the rows of cars toward the avenue. The woman turned out of the lot into the line of traffic. I stepped down slightly on the accelerator, then hit the brake pedal as a convertible came out of a row to my right and loomed in front of me. The driver of the convertible saw me, lurched to a stop. He killed his motor.

I cursed as he worked frantically to start it again. He threw me a harried glance. He was an immaculate man of perhaps fifty years in a black Homburg but, more important, he was blocking the exit to the avenue.

The convertible motor came

alive. It roared. Exhaust ballooned. The man gave me another frantic look. I waved him on and he lurched forward. He made it to the avenue this time before he killed the motor again. Then he suddenly zoomed away from me and I finally managed to get into the flow of traffic. But I knew it was too late.

The red-haired woman had vanished.

SENATOR TRACY was angry and distraught when I returned to the parking lot and told him what had happened, but he didn't have a corner on edginess. "Okay," I snapped as he hung arched through the open window on the passenger side of my sedan, "it's time we leveled."

"How could you allow her to escape?" he exploded.

"I was out maneuvered," I admitted. "This morning you told me to watch for a man. I accepted what you said on face value. But now—"

"Well, I assumed it would be a man!"

"Why?" I shot at him.

He winced. "I had my reason."

"Look, Senator—"

He muttered an oath, passed a hand across his damp face.

"What was in the suitcase?" I continued. "Money? Is someone blackmailing—"

"Please," he said dismally.

"I'm going to the police Senator. You can come along or you can vamoose. You won't be difficult to find."

"No!" he burst. "Not the police. I can't go to the police."

"But I can," I said, determined.

Driving back downtown, I wasn't sure why I was taking Senator Tracy and his troubles to Sergeant Crocker in the detective division. But I knew one consolation: the Senator's rented green sedan was right behind me.

In the police parking lot, he made a last effort to stop me. He caught my arm and halted my steps.

"Please," he said, the muscles in his narrow face jumping. "No police. Imogene could be—"

He cut off the words abruptly. He shuffled his feet. His eyes danced away and seemed to find something across the busy street. He clamped his lips.

"Imogene?" I probed.

He was a long time answering. "My—daughter."

"What about her?"

"She goes to school at the university here in the city. She will begin her second year next fall. It has to do with her!"

"So?"

He suddenly was looking at me again. His eyes held mine. There was a plea in them. But as we stood there staring at each other, I saw the plea slowly change to resignation and finally he drew a long breath.

"All right, Mr. Taylor," he said. "My daughter has been kidnaped and I was warned not to go to police or any other law enforcement agency. I was told I am being followed. I was told that if I did go to police—"

"How much, Senator, was in the suitcase?" I broke in wearily.

"Two hundred thousand dollars."

SERGEANT CROCKER is a resigned, blunt, disheveled man who has been a detective almost twenty years and might get excited if someone rolled a live hand grenade up beside his desk in the scarred squad room. Now he listened to me without interrupting and you easily might have surmised that he wasn't hearing a word as he sat far back in the squeaky swivel chair behind the desk and steepled his stubby fingers under his jaw.

But I knew that he was minutely digesting every word, that his thoughts were churning, and that when I finished he would turn on Senator Tracy with a minimum of words.

He did. He looked Tracy straight in the eye. "Senator? From the beginning, please."

"I'm not sure where the beginning is, Sergeant."

"You're a resident of California, Senator," Crocker said. "It's not unusual, I suppose. But why did you, a State official, send your daughter to a university halfway across the country?"

"That is because of my sister. She lives here. Her name is Bernadette Funafuti. She is a widow, as I am a widower. Her husband died approximately eight months ago. Perhaps you have heard of Bernadette? She is quite civic-minded. She has helped with many of the charity drives here."

Neither Crocker nor I had heard of Bernadette Funafuti.

"Well," Senator Tracy continued, seeming to find our not being aware of his sister difficult to digest, "Imogene makes her home with Bernadette, has since attending the university. Of course, she could live in a dormitory or a sorority house during the school year and with me in Washington during the summer, but Imogene is a rather—well, independent girl. Very much like Bernadette, I'm afraid. She definitely has a mind of her own and she prefers to reside with—"

"Against your wishes," Crocker interrupted.

Senator Tracy jerked on the intrusion.

"I have the impression, Senator, that you would prefer your daughter did live in a dorm or sorority house during the school year and with you in the summer months," Crocker said. "I have the impression that if your daughter had selected another university in the country, almost any other university, you—"

"Imogene is fond of my sister, always has been," the Senator said heavily.

"And you are not." Crocker made it a statement.

"That's another matter, Sergeant."

"Perhaps," Crocker stared. The Senator fidgeted. Then Crocker said, "Okay, get on with it."

Early Sunday evening Bernaddette Funafuti had telephoned her brother long distance in Washington. Bernadette was worried. Imogene, renting a car Saturday evening, had gone away for the weekend without saying anything to her aunt and without calling while she was gone. This was not at all usual.

"Imogene often rented a car on weekends, all right, especially during the summer months, but always told her aunt where she would be over the weekend or, upon arrival at her destination, telephoned. This past weekend she did neither.

"So, naturally," the Senator said,

"when it got to be early Sunday evening and Bernadette still had not heard from Imogene, she telephoned me."

"This renting a car business—" Crocker let it hang, frowned, but before he could continue Senator Tracy explained, "When Imogene completes her education I will purchase a car for her. Not before. And Bernadette, although athletically inclined, never has learned to drive, never has owned an automobile. It is one of the odd things about her, Sergeant."

"Uh-huh," Crocker said. Then: "Where does your daughter go on weekends, Senator?"

"I believe there is a beach area called The Lark somewhere in the vicinity."

"Yeah," Crocker grunted. "It's about fifty miles north."

"And there are accomodations."

"Cabins and a hotel, yeah, but during the summer months the place is jammed."

"I think my daughter keeps a standing week-end reservation, Sergeant."

"I see."

Crocker belched, then asked, "How comes your sister didn't call up there if—"

"She did," Senator Tracy interrupted. "And when she discovered that Imogene was not there, had not been there this past weekend, she became doubly concerned. That's when she telephoned me."

"And you?"

"Caught a flight, took a suite at the Arnold, then went out to see Bernadette."

A voice crackled behind them, "Lieutenant?"

Crocker scowled on the interruption, Senator Tracy flinched, and I twisted in my chair to look on the large, deep-chested girl who stood at the low railing that divided the working area from the entrance of the squad room. A mass of black hair was fashioned high around her head to give her a mushroomed look and a bright yellow dress was a size too small on a cushiony figure.

The girl came through the swinging gate in the railing and marched to Crocker's desk. She had splendid legs and she twitched them briefly as she took in the Senator and me, and then she looked down on Sergeant Crocker and said in a voice pitched high by excitement, "Lieutenant, I've got a complaint!"

"Rosie," Crocker said wearily, "how many times have I brought you in?"

She blinked large eyes in obvious confusion. "Three, I guess. Why?"

"I'm a sergeant, remember?"

"Oh. Yeah." She hesitated. "But the louse stole from me! Fifty bucks! Two twenties and a ten I had stashed!"

"Yeah?"

"My old man!"

"Your father?"

"My old man. My hubby. You know?"

Crocker sighed. "I didn't know you were married, Rosie."

"I wasn't till yesterday."

"You got married yesterday?"

"Yeah, but I think it's gonna be a bum deal."

"Congratulations anyway."

"It wasn't no church weddin', you unnerstand. It was sorta an agreement."

"Yeah?"

"Cannon law, something like that."

"Common law maybe."

"Yeah, maybe that's it."

"Rosie," Crocker said with remarkable patience, "I'm gonna send you downstairs. That's where you file complaints. You go down there and the first cop you see you ask him where you can file—"

"But I wanna complain to you! I I like you, Lieutenant! You're a good jerk!"

"Thanks, but you hafta file the complaints downstairs. The boys will help you."

"Well—"

"Anderson!" Crocker bawled.

A slight man, who obviously was a chain smoker, left another desk, came for the girl, and took her out of the room. I wanted to chide Crocker a bit, but he abruptly was all business again. With the Senator. He said, "All right, you flew into town, checked into a hotel and then went to see your sister. Take it from there."

"Well—" Senator Tracy seemed to have difficulty finding words. "Bernadette and I discussed the situation and finally decided that perhaps we were panicking. After all, Imogene is twenty years of age and she always has been capable of taking care of herself. So Bernadette and I decided to wait a bit.

"Perhaps—neither of us put it into words, of course—the girl was having a weekend romance."

"When did you realize she was a kidnap victim?" Crocker broke in.

"Monday morning." The Senator paused before continuing in a rush of words. "I returned to the hotel, slept fitfully, then took a cab back out to Bernadette's home Monday morning. There was no word. I checked with the automobile rental agency and found that Imogene had not returned the car. After—"

"What agency?" Crocker wanted to know.

"Glass."

"Okay."

"I checked with the agency and then Bernadette and I decided to wait until noon. I returned to the hotel. I had some calls to Washington to make and—well, Sergeant, that's when I found the ransom note. When I returned to my suite. It was on a table in the front room."

"Note?"

"It was in an envelope on the table. It said that Imogene was being held and that I was now being followed and would be followed

until payment of the money was made. It said not to contact police. It said that I was to put two hundred thousand dollars in cash in a suitcase and take the suitcase to the market parking lot at two-thirty this afternoon, go into the market, wait fifteen minutes and then—"

"How did the note get on the table?"

"I don't know."

"Isn't it obvious that it had to be put there by someone, that someone had to enter your suite?"

"Yes, I guess it is."

"Where is it?"

"I have it at the hotel."

"I want it."

"All right."

"Why didn't you call us or the FBI immediately?"

"I was confused, frightened."

"What you mean is, you could afford to pay, so you did rather than—"

"I was desperate, Sergeant!"

"Not so desperate you didn't make a stab at learning who kidnaped your daughter. What were you going to do if Taylor, here, had been able to follow the woman? Move in yourself? Make demands?"

"I planned to call you people!"

"Great."

"I couldn't come to you! The note said—"

"How the hell did you ever become a senator?"

"Sergeant, I resent—"

"Sergeant," I said, attempting to cool both of them, "the money has been paid. We can't do anything about that now. All we can do is hope the girl is freed, then concentrate on who might know the Senator well enough to know that he is a wealthy man and that his daughter makes her home here with his sister."

"Hell," Crocker flared, still seething, "he's a big man, ain't he?"

"Conceded," I nodded. "Anyone interested knows that he is wealthy, but how many people can tell you where his daughter Imogene lives?"

"Another government," the Senator blurted. "An enemy of the United States."

Even I gaped as he rushed on: It was public knowledge that he was a key member of a hush-hush military-space committee whose work in the space and missile programs eventually was to be vital to the defense of the nation.

His daughter could have been abducted by agents of a competing government. She would be brainwashed. Later she would reappear as a defector. She would publicly denounce the United States. Purpose: to embarrass senator-father and to cast a pall over him as a member of the military-space committee, probably cause his removal from the committee and, in turn, set back the committee's work five years if he, Senator Tracy, had to be replaced.

"Senator," I said, "if true, why demand ransom? Those kind of people would have taken your daughter, disappeared and allowed her to reappear later if it was convenient. They wouldn't be interested in money."

"Then what?" he demanded.

"I prefer to keep it simple, like a plain, old-fashioned kidnaping for money. Sergeant?"

Crocker had cooled, but all he did was grunt.

"Perhaps someone from the university?" I suggested. "Any of her acquaintances. Or acquaintances of her acquaintances. Anyone who might have the vaguest idea of who she is, who her father is."

Crocker used the phone on his desk, called the FBI office in the city. When he finished, he said grimly, "They're sending over a man." He looked at Senator Tracy. "We'll want that note."

"All right." The Senator sounded defeated.

"One thing," Crocker said. "How did you put your hands on so much cash so fast? I understand even rich men sometimes find it difficult to—"

"A friend in California," the Senator said. "A banker. I had to take him into my confidence, naturally, but I trust him. I chartered a flight Monday, flew out, got the money, returned Tuesday. I got back here late Tuesday night. I—"

A rasping sound interrupted. A tall, immaculate man in a sharply creased blue suit, blue silk necktie, black Homburg and black and gold walking cane stood alone at the railing, tapping the cane against the gate. He was straight as a young sapling, he probably was fifty, and he looked ill. His eyes gleamed with a peculiar brightness, the muscles in his face twitched spastically.

He came through the railing, seemed to recognize me, then went up on his toes with a gasp, clutched his stomach, and pitched forward to sprawl on the floor. The black Homburg flipped from a mane of pure white hair.

"What the hell . . ." Crocker exploded.

The realization swept me when I took the man's shoulders. I turned his head so I could see his face. It was contorted now, the eyes screwed down tight, the mouth gaping open. It was the man who had blocked my exit from the supermarket parking lot. Quickly I filled Crocker in with the details.

"Dead," I said, looking up at Crocker. "He won't do any talking."

"Damn," he said. "We lose 'em as soon as we—"

"Hey," a feminine voice said, "where's the Lieutenant?"

"Beat it, Rosie!" Crocker rasped.

"I've been downstairs," she complained. "I've talked to fifteen cops and nobody's written down a thing! All they do is move me from one

chair to another and—oh my God, what's that?"

"A corpse," Crocker said bluntly.

She came through the gate and stared down on the dead man. Suddenly she cut off a breath. "Hey, it's him!"

I snapped erect.

"Who?" Crocker asked sharply.

"I dunno! But that's him! He can't talk! He's—what do you call 'em?"

"A mute?"

"Yeah, a mute! He can't talk! I seen him at the Arnold! Look, all I got is a complaint!"

"So did this guy."

"Huh?"

"See what can happen? Who is he?"

"Honest, Lieutenant, I dunno!"

"But you know he is a mute."

"Well, sure. I seen him at the Arnold, like I told yuh."

"When?"

"Last Monday night—Tuesday night."

"Which was it, Rosie? Monday or Tues—"

"Both, Lieutenant! He was at the bar in the lounge."

"Did you solicit him?"

"Lieutenant, what do yuh think I am?"

"We've had you in three times, Rosie."

"They were bum raps. You know that. You never proved—"

"Did you hit him?"

"Well, maybe I—what I mean is— In his inside coat pocket there was a card with his name. I forgot it. There wasn't any money." She had the grace to flush.

Crocker turned on the detective named Anderson. "Check downstairs, Andy. Somebody had to see this guy come in. I wanna know how he got here."

Crocker faced Senator Tracy. "Is he familiar to you?"

"N-no."

Anderson returned, his eyes alight with excitement. "The stiff was driving a rental car, Sergeant. It's in the No Parking zone out front—and it was rented to an Imogene Tracy."

"Give it every test in the book, Sergeant," Crocker said curtly. "Get Rosie the hell out of here." And to her, "Stop rolling those drunks, kid. You'll live longer."

Crocker removed items from the dead man's pockets. They included a penknife, eighty-four cents in silver, forty-two dollars in bills, four hundred dollars in travelers' checks and cards in his wallet that said he was Gino Gallipoli and that his residence was Newark, N.J.

Crocker messaged Newark police and then the FBI man arrived. His name was Hawkins. He looked like a college athlete and he was patient as he was filled in.

We went after the ransom note. The FBI man said nothing and Crocker allowed me to trail with them.

Hawkins gingerly removed the

note from its envelope. The words in it had been clipped from newspapers and magazines and pasted together to form the message. Hawkins called down to the desk and asked the name and phone number of the maid who had cleaned the room that morning. When he got her, he learned she had found the envelope on the floor, as if it had been pushed under the door, and she had placed it on the table in the front room of the suite.

Leaving a tired, worried Senator Tracy in his suite, we drove to the Glass Rent-A-Car Agency and discovered that Imogene Tracy had checked out a car at seven o'clock Saturday evening. The car was to have been returned at seven o'clock Sunday evening, but had not been. Management had filed a complaint with police.

"We have the car," Crocker told the man at the agency. "You'll get it back in a couple of days."

Bernadette Funafuti lived in a showplace home. She received us in a magnificent library. She was handsome and preserved at forty and generously polite. She wore a brilliant red lounging suit, had natural white hair that had been fashioned by an expert, and there was no doubt in my mind that she also was a natural on a tennis court or golf course, in a swimming pool, or at a horse race.

But Hawkins did not learn anything new about the disappearance of Imogene, Senator Tracy's arrival in the city, or the payoff to the kidnaper.

Bernadette Funafuti corroborated her brother's story, including his decision to employ a private detective in an effort to learn the destination of the kidnaper after the payoff had been made, and that was all.

Finally she asked, "Gentlemen, are you completely stymied?"

No one said anything for a few seconds, then Crocker, shooting a glance at Hawkins, returned her question: "Is the name Gino Gallipoli familiar?"

Bernadette Funafuti turned on a surprised look. "Gino? Well, certainly. He is the Baron's half brother."

"Baron?" Crocker prodded.

"My deceased husband," said the woman. "The Baron and Gino came to the United States from Europe shortly after World War II. I believe it was in 1948. The Baron was out of a royal family, you know. He had the true royal blood in his veins. Gino did not, but he and my husband were quite close. Gino is a mute, some kind of a war injury—but why do you ask about him? I haven't seen him since the Baron's passing. He lives in the East someplace. New Jersey, I believe."

Crocker hesitated before telling her about Gino Gallipoli collapsing in the squad room.

"Dead?" she said, her voice go-

ing up an actave. "Gino is dead?"

"Yes," said Crocker.

"But how? And what was Gino doing here? Why was he in the city? I mean, why didn't he come here to the house?"

"Then you didn't know he was in town?" Crocker said.

"I had no idea."

Crocker shot Hawkins another glance.

"Sergeant," Bernadette Funafuti said after a moment, "didn't you have the opportunity to communicate with Gino? Before he collapsed, didn't you—"

"He walked into the squad room and died, Mrs. Funafuti," Crocker said flatly. "Tell me, do you consider it unusual that Gino Gallipoli would be in the city and not come here to your house?"

"Very," she said, frowning. "I told you, he and the Baron were quite close."

"Then he had visited here before, while your husband was living?"

"Certainly."

"Was Imogene living with you then?"

"Yes. She moved in when she entered the university. The Baron was alive—"

"Then Gino would know about Imogene? He would know who she is?"

"Certainly." Bernadette Funafuti's frown deepened. "But I don't see—"

"I'm just trying to get the family relationship straight in my mind," Crocker continued. "Your brother was in the squad room when Gino collapsed, but he said he did not recognize the man."

"I would be surprised if he had," the woman said. She hesitated, then looked Crocker straight in the eye. "My brother did not approve of my marriage to the Baron. In recent years, he has avoided me and my life as much as possible. He would not know Gino. I even doubt that he knows the Baron had a half brother."

"I see," Crocker said slowly. Then: "Does Gino Gallipoli have a family?"

"Not to my knowledge," said the woman.

"A wife?"

She shook her head. "If he does, I didn't know it."

"What was his line of work, his business?"

"I can't help you, Sergeant," the woman said with another frown. "I don't know. Once the Baron mentioned something about investments, but he was not explicit and, frankly, I was not that interested in Gino. I was only interested in my husband."

"What was his work? The Baron's?"

Again she looked Crocker straight in the eye. "He was retired. I have some money."

And there was a challenge in the sudden silence. It was as if Bernadette Funafuti was daring Haw-

kins, Crocker or myself, collectively or individually, to put a label on her baron. I think we all had the same label in mind—gigolo, or perhaps if we chose to be polite, opportunist—but no one said a word.

Then Hawkins stood suddenly and asked to see Imogene Tracy's room. He asked Crocker to accompany him and for the first time since his arrival in the squad room he seemed to recognize the fact that I was present. He didn't invite me to go with them.

Bernadette Funafuti noticed the exclusion, too, and after Hawkins and Crocker had disappeared up a thickly carpeted satirway, she asked, "Where do you fit, Mr. Taylor?"

I explained and she seemed to consider my role. Finally she nodded. "Somehow I sensed you were not on city or federal payrolls. You have a look about you. I don't know what it is, but—" She let the words hang abruptly, then she looked at me head-on, her face expressionless. "How about a drink? Certainly, you and I can have a drink while those other two pry. Brandy?"

I nodded, waited until she was pouring from a decanter, then asked, "Why aren't you concerned about Imogene's disappearance?"

"Oh, but I am, Mr. Taylor," she said as she returned to me with the brandy. "I'm quite concerned. I'm very fond of the girl. It's just that —well, my brother has paid the ransom and it isn't as if the two hundred thousand dollars is going to put him in the poverty program. He will hardly notice the expenditure, really. And Imogene will be freed now. She will be freed, and she will be unharmed."

"You are very confident."

Bernadette Funafuti shrugged slightly. "People are interested in money, these days. Only money. Certainly, Imogene's kidnapers were—are. What other reason is there for holding her captive?"

"You realize this narrows the field of suspects slightly," I said.

She seemed to ponder it for a moment before she said slowly, "Yes, I suppose it does. It means the kidnapers have to know who Imogene is, doesn't it?"

"On the other hand, why not demand the ransom from you?"

She looked surprised.

"The kidnapers also must know Imogene makes her home with you and—well, you don't appear to live like a pauper, Mrs. Funafuti."

"I see what you mean," she said thoughtfully. She sipped brandy without looking at me and remained quiet for a long time. Finally she looked up. "Mr. Taylor, the reason my brother and I are not close is that while I still was young—twenty-two years of age, to be exact—I left home. There was something inside me then, and there still is, that did not, and does not, cast me among conformists.

"Tritely speaking, I have an

independent streak in me that's a yard wide. I did when I was twenty-two, I do now. I didn't run away from home, Mr. Taylor. I merely existed. My parents and my brother always knew where I was, how I was living. They did not approve. Neither could they stop me. I had some money left to me by my grandfather, bless him, and I lived clean. I worked, I had friends, and then I met and married the Baron. This, apparently, was the crowning blow to my family.

"The Baron was not a laboring man in any sense of the word. He was a genteel man and I loved him for what he was. Naturally, what grandfather had left me began to dwindle but there was plenty for several years of living and, frankly, the Baron and I never did look too far into the future.

"Then my parents were killed in an airplane crash and two months later the Baron suffered a fatal stroke. It was just one of those things. One day he was healthy and we were happy. The next day the stroke hit him, a few hours later he was dead, and I suddenly was alone. It required some adjusting, Mr. Taylor, but I finally managed to gather the loose strings and put my life back together.

"It was then that I discovered that I was on the verge of being embarrassed financially. Grandfather's money had finally run its course; however I did not panic. My parents also had died and there was an estate, a quite sizable estate. The only trouble was, I then learned just how disappointed my parents had been with me. I discovered that their entire estate had been left to my brother, with the condition that he provide for me.

"I was not to starve, you understand. In fact, I was to live quite well, however everything I was to have was to be doled out to me. It has been, and I must say my brother has been generous, but on the other hand there is this division between us. He never is going to forgive me for leaving home, living my own life as I chose to live it, nor am I ever going to be happy about having to live on his handouts, regardless of the amounts. Still, I have some recompense. Imogene, my brother's child, has me in her, an identical streak of independence. It has been a cross for my brother to bear, but he has had to wear it. Quite frankly, I have enjoyed every minute of it.

"Perhaps there is a sense of vendetta in it for me, but when Imogene came to me, expressed a desire to live with me, go to the university here, I encouraged her and I've encouraged her since. I enjoy seeing my brother squirm, Mr. Taylor.

"I said the Senator has been generous with his handouts. I

would not be truthful with myself if I did accept the fact that this generosity is because of Imogene. The Senator always will provide well for his only child. But to get back to answering your question, no one, including kidnapers, could get two hundred thousand dollars ransom from me. I simply do not have that much money."

"And if our kidnapers had this knowledge that might narrow our field of suspects considerably, would it not?"

Her frown was deep.

"I assume your financial situation is not general knowledge."

"Well, certainly not."

"Gino Gallipoli," I said.

She shook her head in puzzlement.

"Gino was your husband's half brother. They were close. It's possible the Baron may have told Gino—"

"But why would he?"

I shrugged. "Brothers sometimes confide."

"Are you saying, Mr. Taylor, that Gino kidnaped Imogene?"

"I do not exclude the possibility.

"But why would he go to the police? Why would—"

"That, Mrs. Funafuti, is where my thinking falls apart. I have no idea. Nor do we have a woman, and there is a woman involved. She picked up the suitcase. Of course, Gino could have had a wife or a girl-friend."

Crocker and Hawkins were suddenly back in the room. The FBI man held what looked like a diary in his right hand and he asked Bernadette Funafuti if she was aware that Imogene Tracy had kept a diary. The woman nodded. Then Hawkins asked who H. T. might be.

"It will be a man," he said.

Bernadette Funafuti frowned.

"Does Imogene date?"

"Occasionally, but—"

"Not often?"

"No."

"Yet, she is having an affair." Hawkins wiggled the diary. "It's here. There is an entry for almost every Saturday night: 'I am meeting H. T. again. One of history's great love affairs continues!' And then Sunday's entry: 'Has history ever known such love?' Incidently, is Imogene a history major at the university?"

"Not yet, but she plans to enter that field. But why would you surmise—"

"The textbooks in her room," Hawkins said, "And you are not familiar with an H. T.?"

"No," Bernadette Funafuti said positively.

"I believe it is the girl's habit to go to the beach resort, The Lark, quite often?"

"Yes. She goes almost every weekend during the— Oh, do you think—"

"We'll do some checking," said Hawkins.

After we left Bernadette Funafuti, he did some checking, all right, but it was not at The Lark. It was at the university, where we discovered from a faculty roster that there was a Harold Thorman who was an instructor in modern European history.

Driving to the Thorman address, I couldn't hold it back any longer. I asked, "What the devil made you think of the university and a faculty member?"

"Credit Crocker," Hawkins said.

"In the love business—I always begin close to home, Taylor," the detective said. "And the closer, the better."

HAROLD THORMAN was a young, handsome man who was incapable of lying in the face of blunt accusation. And Hawkins, I discovered, was a compassionate man. He drew Thorman out onto a shadowed porch, out of earshot of his wife, before he made the accusation. Thorman crumbled immediately, but also claimed not to have met Imogene Tracy the previous Saturday night.

"I was to meet her, that is true." he stumbled. "We were—we were to meet at The Eleventh Pin. That's a bar in a bowling alley out on Fenmore Avenue. We always meet there and then we drive up to—"

"The beach resort," Hawkins helped. "The Lark."

He nodded miserably.

"But you didn't meet Imogene Tracy last Saturday night?"

"No. She didn't come to the bar. I didn't know why. I haven't seen her this week. She hasn't been in class. I've been worried, but I couldn't make inquiries, either. I—"

"What time were you to meet her?" Hawkins interrupted Thorman curtly.

"Eight o'clock. We always meet at eight o'clock."

"And how long did you wait at the bar?"

"Until it closed."

"And then?"

"Well, I had already told my wife that I was going to spend the night at the university. I often do that. I'm writing a book. I have a cot in my office. I sometimes go there and write all night. Anyway, I didn't want to return home in the middle of the night, especially after I had been drinking. So I got a bottle of bourbon and then went downtown and took a hotel room. I spent most of the rest of the night drinking."

"That's all?" Hawkins wanted to know.

"That's all," Thorman said. "Teachers do get drunk, too, you know. Teachers also have reason to—"

"All right," Hawkins said, clipping the words. "Thank you, Mr. Thorman."

And then we were in the official

sedan again and another question was burning my tongue.

"Do you believe him?" I asked.

"Let him stew in his own juices," Hawkins said tersely. "He needs to."

But at police headquarters, the FBI man became speculative: "An affair could be a key part of the plot, or the kidnaping could have grown out of the affair. Thorman could have selected the girl, managed the affair to gain her confidence, locked her away this past weekend, collected the money. Or he could have been having the affair, then thought about the money."

"There's a woman involved," I said.

"His wife."

"Or maybe Imogene Tracy herself?" I suggested.

Hawkins and Crocker stared at me.

"They want to run away. They need money, enough to allow them to disappear."

Neither man said a word.

"But unfortunately," I sighed, "there is another person. Gino Gallipoli. He was in the parking lot at the market and—" I looked at Crocker— "the Sergeant has a friend named Rosie who saw him at the Arnold Monday and Tuesday evenings. He could have been watching for the Senator."

"Gino is the key, all right," nodded Hawkins.

"Or his woman," I said.

THURSDAY was to be another warm day. The sun already was hot when I braked my sedan outside police headquarters shortly after nine o'clock that morning. In the squad room, I wondered if Crocker and Hawkins had slept at all during the night. They were busy pouring over a dossier on Gino Gallipoli that had arrived from Newark.

Gino, the dossier related, had a way with women. He never had been hooked on a con rap, but there had been complaints filed against him by various widows, divorcees and maidens. All had one thing in common: they were wealthy and some of that wealth had been lavished on Gino Gallipoli, who had not reciprocated quite as originally hoped for. Gino had loved and left.

"Being a lover makes him a kidnaper?" Crocker wanted to know.

"Being a man of his obvious tastes could," said Hawkins. "Two hundred thousand in one shot is quite a bundle. And we now have a woman. This Nancy Ibling, Gino's latest dame. She's a divorcee, all right, but she is not particularly wealthy, which doesn't fit in with his usual pattern."

"Sergeant," I broke in, "how did Gino die?"

He looked bleak while Hawkins pretended I wasn't even in the room. Crocker said, "Natural cause. His ticker stopped pumping."

"Sure, but—"

"Gino Gallipoli had a history of heart trouble," Hawkins said, suddenly looking at me. "In layman's language, he had an enlarged heart. He could go anytime. He almost did once before in a Newark precinct station. He did here."

"Triggered by something or someone?"

"If we knew that, Mr. Taylor, we might—"

He cut off the words with the ringing of the phone on Crocker's desk. The sergeant swept up the receiver, grunted, then listened. A moment later, he jerked forward in his chair.

"When?" he rasped.

He listened again. "All right. We'll be right there."

Crocker put the phone together with a bang. "Imogene Tracy is home," he said. "She was released sometime early this morning. She phoned her aunt from a service station about five miles out of the city. The Senator and his sister drove out and got her."

IMOGENE looked haggard and used. Her skin was soiled, her hair was a tangled nest, and her clothing was dusty and badly wrinkled. She had been put to bed immediately and a doctor busied over her now, but allowed her to talk.

Saturday night, she had gone to pick up Harold Thorman at The Eleventh Pin, but when she had left the rented car in the bowling alley parking lot, she had been struck down from behind. Later she had regained consciousness in what she thought was the basement of an abandoned warehouse, but she could not be sure. She was bound and gagged and tape had been placed across her eyes, mouth and ears. The only time any of the tape had been removed had been to allow her to eat.

Then early that Thursday morning a woman had taken her out of the warehouse in a car. She was positive it had been a woman. She could tell from the touch. The woman had removed the tape from her ears and mouth before putting her in the car. That was why she thought she had been held in a warehouse. Footsteps sounded hollow, there was a sense of empty vastness.

Then she had been put into the car and there had been the immediate sounds of the city streets. Not heavy traffic—that was the reason she surmised it was early morning—but there was the whine of an occasional car whisking past, the clank of what sounded like garbage cans being dumped into the whirring of city disposal trucks.

Finally all of that was behind them and then the woman had stopped the car, took her from it, loosened the rope binding her wrists and had left her. When she had managed to free her hands and remove the tape from her eyes, it had been dark and she had

found herself in a ditch along a country road. She had walked for what seemed hours before finding a highway and the service station.

The doctor broke it up. He said, "The girl has been given a sedative. She will be asleep in a few minutes. Gentlemen?"

We trailed downstairs where the doctor informed us, "She appears to be unharmed, but she is quite fatigued. It will be a few days before she is her normal self."

We left the doctor, Senator Tracy and his sister inside the house and, outside, Crocker mused, "Tape over the ears. To keep her from recognizing a voice?"

"Gino Gallipoli was no amateur, Sergeant," said Hawkins curtly. "We'll need some men. I want to find the spot where the girl was dumped."

Hawkins obviously had discarded me again, and this time I had a surprise for him. I wanted to be discarded. Something was bothering me, nicking at my mind. Something about the kidnaping and releasing of Imogene Tracy was not as cut and dried as it might appear on the surface.

I returned to my apartment-office and prepared a lunch, not sure why I was on edge. I attempted to read the morning paper while I chewed on the sandwich and potato chips and the lines of type made me remember the ransom note. And then my thoughts began to click and I drove downtown to the city's only newspaper, where I asked for the current files and read the previous Monday's morning and afternoon editions meticulously.

Then I talked to a man who identified himself as some kind of an editor. I wanted to know why a story about the presence in the city of such a prominent senator as Tracy had appeared in the Monday afternoon paper but had not been in the morning editions.

"Quite simple," said the editor. "We did not know the Senator was in town. The hotel called Monday morning. You know, looking for free advertising in the news columns, but why—"

I left the editor. I could have given him one of his biggest stories of the year, of course, but I left that for Crocker and the police.

There are two car rental agencies in the city. I picked the Glass Agency and didn't have to go to the other. What I wanted was on their records.

At Bernadette Funafuti's showplace home, I pulled the distributor on my sedan, found Imogene Tracy to be asleep, the doctor and Senator Tracy departed and Bernadette alone. I hit her hard. I asked, "Where have you hidden the ransom money, Mrs. Funafuti?"

She recoiled, gasped for words, and I pressed: "A woman can disguise herself quite adequately

with makeup, cotton in the cheeks perhaps, a wig, old clothing."

Bernadette continued to backpeddle from me.

"Motive," I continued. "To get at least some of the money you figure you have coming from the estate of your mother and father. To get it in a lump, not to be doled out."

She gasped, "You—you can't be serious!"

"Let's put it together this way. You know where Imogene goes when she leaves for weekends. You know who she meets. You've read her diary. Perhaps you have followed her occasionally. Now, you plan the kidnaping, but you need help. Knowing Gino, his tastes, the kind of man he is, you enlist him for a price. One or both of you wait for Imogene at The Eleventh Pin last Saturday night. You kidnap her, using the car she has rented. Next, you phone your brother. You know he will pay. He does.

"But then something happens between you and Gino. He comes to the police and this is where you are a very fortunate woman. He suffers a fatal heart attack before he can tell the police why he has come to them. You must have had some very trying moments last evening when Crocker, Hawkins and I appeared here. After all, we could have been here because Gino had talked. You could not know he was dead until we told you. I say this, Bernadette Funafuti, I say you are a very cool character."

"Mr. Taylor—"

"I also say you drive an automobile in spite of what your brother thinks. I've been to the Glass Agency. Someone rented a car in your name and took it out early this morning. It was you. You knew Gino had died without talking. You have the money. You really did not want to harm Imogene. As soon as you could chance it—in the early hours of this morning—you went to the agency, rented a car, took the girl into the country and freed her. This allowed you enough time to return the car, which you did at five-twenty-three, according to the agency records, and be here when Imogene telephoned."

"Mr. Taylor—"

"Your error? In the delivery of the ransom note to your brother's hotel. It was put under his door around mid-morning Monday. But at that time who in the city knew he was in town? Not the public. Not even the newspaper. And who would know what suite he had taken?"

"B-but—"

"He checked in at the Arnold before coming out here Sunday night. He told you where he was staying. He gave you the suite number in case you heard something from his daughter. After all, *she* couldn't know he was here,

where he was. You knew he was to return here Monday morning. All Gino had to do was watch him leave the hotel, then go up."

She was behind me now. I kept my back to her purposely. But I could see her image in the reflection of a glassed picture on the wall in front of me. I saw her reach for the lamp.

"And there's Gino's appearance in the parking lot," I continued, "the blocking me off when you were escaping with the money. Who would know of your brother's plan to employ an investigator? Who would know that a blockade would be needed?"

I watched her reflection as she lifted the lamp in both hands high above her head. I saw the lamp descend, waited until the final second and then tucked in my head. The lamp shattered against my shoulder and I plunged forward with a shout. The blow bruised but did not knock me unconscious, as it had been designed. However, Bernadette Funafuti was too busy fleeing now to realize it.

She surprised me. I had expected her to take the money from a wall safe or pull the suitcase from a closet. Instead, she bolted from the house and she was inside my car and attempting to start it when I staggered out onto the wide porch. She apparently saw the sedan turn into the driveway at the same time I did. She left my car and raced across the green lawn, the tennis legs flying. Hawkins brought her down with a diving tackle.

Hawkins, Senator Tracy and his sister were behind a closed door in a small office off the squad room. I sat before Sergeant Crocker's desk, staring at him.

"You going to tell me?" I asked finally. "Or do I go the rest of my life wondering? Who came up with the time element?"

"Hawkins," Crocker grunted. "After we got back here to the station this morning. There was a message from Newark police. They'd turned up Nancy Ibling in Amarillo, Texas. She and Gino split about ten days ago. She had been in Amarillo since, visiting an ex-husband. There's no doubt she could prove it."

"The time element," I prodded him.

Crocker shrugged. "With the Ibling dame out of the picture, there really was only one dame left. That's when Hawkins began to calculate. And now you tell me, hero. What were you going to do after you let that female clobber you?"

"Make a citizen's arrest. Hell, I had to get her to commit herself, didn't I? All I had were some scrambled thoughts."

"Not too damned scrambled. But what if she had really clobbered you? What if she had made that lamp good?"

"She wasn't going anywhere in

my heap. I'd already fixed the distributor."

"Yeah," he grunted. "But it's guys like you who get killed. It's guys like you who—"

He became silent as Hawkins left the small office. Hawkins closed the door behind him and said, "It's a family matter now. The money is at the warehouse."

"Gino," I said. "Why did Gino decide to come to the police?"

"She offered him ten thousand dollars for his part," Hawkins said, "but he held out. He wanted a fifty-fifty split and when she said no dice he warned her never to allow the girl to be kidnaped under any circumstances. He always could go to the Senator and the police with the story about her once offering him a role in an abduction.

"She was trapped. Of course, the girl could have gone through life without ever being a victim, but if she ever was, Gino was immediately going to become a bloodsucker—or an informer. So she finally agreed to the split. Then after she had picked up the money, she told him her brother had only paid one hundred thousand. Fifty per cent was fifty thousand. If she got away with it, she saved an extra fifty for herself. But Gino didn't buy.

"He got excited. And then an old ailment caught up with him. His ticker kicked up while they were arguing. We'll never know, of course, but he must have thought he was going to die and he apparently vowed not to let Mrs. Funafuti get away clean. He apparently took the car the Tracy girl had rented and drove here, but he didn't quite make it all the way."

"Lieutenant?"

Crocker hunched into himself, I grinned, and Hawkins stared stone-faced. It was Rosie, okay, in a lavender dress today, but still a size too small for her healthy figure.

"Lieutenant," she said, coming through the gate in the railing, "I gotta ask yuh a favor." Her eyes moved to Hawkins, inventoried, sparkled, left him reluctantly.

"Sure, Rosie," Crocker said wearily.

"I wanna—well, I wanna take away my complaint."

"Yeah?"

"My old man come home."

"Rose, you amaze me," Crocker said with a deep sigh.

"Sometimes, Lieutenant, I even amaze myself!"

MONOGRAM

by FRANK SISK

He could buy and sell anything. But then—two years before his suicide—he met a girl who wouldn't be sold . . .

THE LAWYER came whistling down the hospital steps, two at a time. The tune was an off-key version of "Turkey in the Straw." A hatless man with crinkled gray hair, sitting on an iron bench in the

late-afternoon shadow of an eucalyptus tree, called out, "Hi, there, Billy."

Apparently deafened by the traffic noises, the lawyer turned right toward the parking lot and kept on going. The hatless man left the bench and, holding his left hand protectively against an assortment of pencils in the breast pocket of his seersucker coat, broke into a stiff-legged trot. He overtook the lawyer at the parking-lot entrance.

"One helluva hurry," he panted.

The lawyer stopped whistling but his lips remained pursed for another second before widening in a grin. "Why, hello, Sam. You covering Emergency this week?"

"Maternity. The wife's kid sister just had the nerve to have twins."

"Fertility drugs?"

"Plain fertility, my guess. I saw you go into an elevator as I was coming out and decided to hang around. Personal curiosity."

"About what? As if I didn't know."

"Whitman Pitt. Off the record, Billy, what's the real word?"

"He's going to live."

"We know that. But what the hell made him do it?"

"You know that, too, don't you, Sam? A fit of jealousy. That's what your paper called it this morning. An *alleged* fit of jealousy."

"It wasn't my story, Billy."

"It's not even your type of story, Sam. So why the extra-curricular interest?"

The reporter looked almost sheepish. "Don't broadcast it, Billy, but I think I'm writing a book."

"I'll be damned." The lawyer showed tolerant amusement. "You mean you're trying to dig up human interest like any cub reporter —an old hack like you, Sam? You should be ashamed of yourself."

"It's not that kind of stuff, Billy, a novel. It's a nonfiction thing. A study of the Achilles' heel that crippled so many financial wizards in the field of ethics and morals. I got a publisher definitely interested."

"Deep," the lawyer said but with a genuine flicker of interest. "You're using actual names?"

"When the subject is dead, yes. Ford, DuPont, Hearst, Morgan—the founders, not the sons. But they all had some sort of weak spot, Billy, for which they developed a compensating strength, and that's what made them so financially powerful. In the case of Pitt, a living contemporary, I'd have to call him Mister X if I used him at all. I'm not sure he fits in. My interest at the moment is purely academic."

"He fits in all right." The lawyer smiled musingly. "He's made a few million from scratch. He's got the essential flaw in his character, developed to the point of monomania, and it's made him what he is today. Yeah, Sam, I'd say that Whitman Pitt fits your thesis very well. But as his attorney—his former attorney, rather—I'll have to

remind you that I must respect his privacy." The last sentence was delivered with light irony.

"He just fired you?"

"No. I just resigned. Where's your car, Sam?"

"The wife's got it. Shopping."

"Want a lift?"

"I didn't want to come right out and ask. Where to?"

The lawyer glanced at his wrist watch. "Well, I've got an engagement with Mrs. Pitt in an hour. How about a drive along Ocean Avenue? It's relaxing at this time of day."

"Why not?" The reporter shrewdly kept a straight face.

"It's conducive to thinking out loud."

"So I've heard."

"Let's go then."

They went to a Lincoln convertible of pale green with the top down. On each door, lettered in gold leaf, were the pointed Gothic monograms WP. "William Prentice," said the reporter as he slid into the seat. "Fancy, Billy. Very fancy."

"I quite agree, Sam. But it's not really mine. I'm delivering it to a lady."

"What's her first name—Wilma?"

"Amanda, Amanda Pitt." The lawyer suddenly perceived the reporter's drift. "Oh, the initials. Well, hell, Sam, they stand for Whitman Pitt. Who else?"

"Come to mention it, I've heard that about him. Got his brand on everything, hasn't he?"

"Just about." The lawyer moved the big car smoothly toward the street. "That's the outward sign of this monomania I mentioned. We might even coin a word for it. Monogramania. How's that?"

"Not bad for a barrister, Billy."

"And speaking of that, Sam anything I may say impulsively from now on is strictly hearsay and I'll deny it under oath. Understand?"

"I never broke a confidence in my life, Billy, and you know it."

The lawyer nodded and took a thin cigar from the inside pocket of his raw silk sports jacket. Then, on second thought, he offered it to the reporter, who held up a negative left hand and, with the right, produced a mashed pack of cigarettes. The lawyer stripped the cellophane wrapper from the cigar while the reporter searched himself futilely for matches. The lawyer came up with a gold lighter, flicked it to flame and held it out.

Leaning sideways, the reporter ignited the tip of his cigarette and noticed, partly concealed by the lawyer's forefinger, the WP monogram again.

"What's it stand for on the lighter, Billy—William Prentice or Whitman Pitt?"

The lawyer gave a short laugh. "Well, either I guess. Originally it belonged to Whit. One day I admired it, just for something to say,

and be damned if he didn't give it to me."

"Generous to a fault."

"One way to look at it, maybe. But primarily Whit likes to have people deeply and constantly indebted to him. It gives him the upper hand."

"I can believe it," the reporter said tonelessly. "Based on my own limited experience with the gentleman."

"That's right," said the lawyer as if just remembering. "You ran afoul of him a few years ago in the Wagner stock deal." He pulled thoughtfully at the cigar. "Come to think of it, Sam I believe you were the main reason why the entire transaction was scuttled."

"I like to think so," the reporter said. "I was the only financial writer at that famous cocktail party who understood the tricky deal he was going to pull on the Wagner family."

"I don't believe you were the only one who understood, Sam. That wouldn't be quite accurate. But you certainly were the only journalist present who failed to appreciate the significance of the engraved invitation."

"Invitation?"

"You don't even remember it, do you?"

The reporter nodded slowly to himself. "It's coming back. Yes. Why, hell, yes, Billy. Quite a piece of graphic art, now that you mention it. And it didn't come from the corporation but came directly from Whitman Pitt. I believe I am right!"

"You're right."

"Very personalized, with a big buckler of a crest. And yes, by God, with the monogram superimposed."

"Naturally. You weren't being invited to the festivities by the body corporate or even by Whitman Pitt as president of said body. You were being invited, man to man, by WP as a personal favor, and when, in the course of the afternoon, he casually explained the Wagner stock transaction, you were supposed to assume he was giving you the story more or less in confidence.

"This confidential version was what you were supposed to publish, if you published anything at all. You violated a whole set of canons when you went to press next morning, Sam, with a completely different story."

"So I discovered a few days later."

"He tried to get you fired, didn't he?"

"And came close. Luckily, the publisher was temporarily posing as a tower of incorruptibility. His name was being mentioned at the time, mostly by himself, as a gubernatorial prospect. But we never got another line of advertising from any of the Pitt interests."

"He's a dangerous man to cross," the lawyer said. "You learned it

the easy way, Sam. Others haven't been so lucky."

"His wife, for instance?"

The lawyer looked sidelong at the reporter. "What do you know about his wife?"

"Only what I *don't* read in the papers, Billy. Only what I read between the lines. Surmise. A hell of a lot more went on last night in the Alexander Hotel than ever got into the morning papers."

The lawyer grinned but said nothing. He drove the car in an apparently thoughtful silence along the wide expanse of Ocean Avenue. Upon coming to an area where parallel parking stalls were marked in white paint on the asphalt pavement, he selected one removed by several spaces from the nearest parked car. He turned off the ignition and, with a sigh of satisfaction, gazed out where the blue wash of the sky touched the blue-green sea.

"The best things in life are free," he said. "Corny, Sam, but true."

"Yeah," the reporter said with a faint smile, "and a good man is hard to find."

The lawyer laughed. "Okay, Sam. You and I have been fairly well acquainted for ten years at least. So, off the record, what do you want to know?"

"Off the record, strictly, why does a self-satisfied heel like Whitman Pitt marry a dainty dessert like Amanda Freeborn? In fact, why does he marry anybody when he can practically dragoon the field? And why does he wait till he's forty?"

"Give me a synonym for venal, Sam."

"Mercenary, greedy, and very covetous—"

"Covetous," said the lawyer, slowly slicing off each syllable. "That's got the right flavor, I think. Whitman Pitt at forty was covetous of Amanda Freeborn at twenty-four."

"But a bubble-bath model, Billy, by way of county-fair beauty pageants, for God sake."

"Never nurture the idea that Whit ever found beauty contestants beneath him. Nor, for that matter, belly dancers, snake charmers, waitresses, chorines or call girls. He was always discreet but he often condescended to take a royal whack at mundane maidens."

"That's exactly what I mean. What made him sign up this particular maiden for ninety-nine years instead of taking a temporary rental?"

"He tried, Sam. When he first saw her rise from a sea of soapsuds on a teevee commercial, he sought to have her agent deliver the package gift-wrapped. I mean it. And he failed."

"Well, hurray for somebody," the reporter said.

"Hurray for Amanda."

"So she snubbed him at first, did she?"

"Not quite the way you mean it. Since you don't know the lady personally, Sam, I better fill you in a little. Off the record."

"Off the record."

"Her natal surname is a descriptive fit, Sam. Freeborn. Unfettered as a spring zephyr and just as refreshing. She knows right from wrong, of course, when it comes to such infractions of the social code as murder, grand theft, arson and forgery. But in the subtler realm of private morality, Amanda was born free of certain finical inhibitions, bless her.

"Hence, while the ineffable Whit was trying to bring her to conquest by fair means or foul, mostly foul, Amanda was so busily engaged with other males as to be blithely unaware of our hero's overtures. Once I asked her how she first came to meet Pitt and she honestly couldn't remember. She said something to the effect that a model meets so many handsome men at parties day and night that it often takes a dozen meetings before a certain man registers as a distinct personality. Can you imagine anyone else grouping the great Whitman Pitt that way? I can't and, of course, Whit couldn't.

"So in a sense, you see, while he was trying unsuccessfully to compromise her virtue, he was really standing toward the end of a stag line and didn't even know it. Amanda wasn't snubbing him at all, to use your word; she merely expected him to wait his turn. But he misconstrued her immediate unavailability as total indifference and the idea obsessed him like crazy.

"I watched him closely at this period and he was definitely a man who had lost view of all coordinates. It never entered his one-way mind that a woman who denied him what he was willing to pay for in cold cash or hard stones might give it to somebody else just for the fun of it. He reasoned that, in refusing him, she was refusing everybody. And at age twenty-four yet. If you get what I mean."

"I sure do," the reporter said.

"Well, the big boy got practically manic with frustration. So at last he offered her something he regarded as a gift of inestimable value—his hand, monogram ring and all, in a contract of marriage. Amanda took her own good time about saying yes. If he had kept his assigned place in the stag line, he might have heard yes a lot sooner. Delicious irony there, Sam.

"But finally the banns were published in all the gossip columns and the wedding took place quietly in the Green Dolphin Room of the Alexander Hotel. That was two years ago, you'll remember—a front-page story locally and on the wire at least along the eastern seaboard. I was the best man."

The reporter was lighting a cigarette with the car lighter. "How

long have you worked for the bastard, Billy?"

"Ever since I met him—twenty, twenty-two years ago."

"At college then, must've been?"

"Yale. Our senior year. I needed a part-time job to fill in where a scholarship left off, and Whit hired me."

"You mean he had some kind of business going while he was at college?"

"Of course. He owned three fuel oil trucks. Yellow tanks, I remember, with red cabs and the monogram WP in broad white letters on the doors. He'd bought them in his junior year with a legacy from his father's will. Anway, he gave me a dollar an hour to drive one on household deliveries around New Haven, in a pair of green coveralls with WP stitched across the back. He had about six of us on his payroll."

"You've got to take your hat off to the guy," the reporter said grudgingly.

"He expects you to," the lawyer said.

"Well, when you got out of law school, Billy, how did you hook up with him again?"

"Easy, Sam. I was into him for a few thousand, not to mention the handkerchiefs, and by then he was big enough to retain an attorney. Besides, I needed the job."

"Handkerchiefs? You said handkerchiefs, didn't you?"

"That's right." The lawyer

grinned. "Monogrammed handkerchiefs. William Prentice, Whitman Pitt, the initials are the same.

"So whenever Whit ordered his annual allotment of Irish linen handkerchiefs with monogram, he always had the supplier do up a dozen cotton ones for me with the same initials—at no extra cost, I learned later—and each year he sent me six at Christmas and six on my birthday. Thoughtful, wasn't it?"

"He gets his money's worth, doesn't he?"

"Most of the time. In my case, I figure he got a little more." A frown furrowed the lawyer's brow for a moment and he appeared to be worried about a gull that went

screeching along the foaming fringe of surf.

"One thing, though, Sam," he continued with a fresh smile, "he never came close to realizing a return on his marital investment. Being a bachelor myself, I kind of felt sorry to see him formalizing his relationship to womanhood. Later on, as I began to see what was really happening to him, I took a hard-earned but secret satisfaction in the situation.

"You see, Sam, from the very beginning it was obvious to anyone with half an eye that Amanda didn't belong to him. Unlike his other possessions, including me, she didn't seem to know her place in the order of things. He settled her down in that lovely mansion on Queen Cay, which you can nearly see from here on a clear day, but she wouldn't stay put. Have you ever seen that place, by the way—Windward Portal, he calls it?"

"No, Billy. Can't say I have."

"You note the recurring initials?"

"I noted that. He sounds pretty far gone on that subject."

"Just listen. The decorative shutters on the place are carved in openwork—a *w* on the right shutter and a *p* on the left. The doorknocker is an ingenious union of these letters. They stare up at you from the fat hempen doormat. Inside the initials greet you at every turn—on towels, on napkins, on cigarette boxes and on the cigarettes themselves, on cigar humidors, cigar bands and liquor decanters; and naturally on all the glass and silver as well as on bedspreads, pillowcases, sheets and blankets. You get the picture, Sam. The emblem of ownership everywhere. With the single exception of Amanda. She wouldn't conform.

"She managed to endure Windward Portal about two days a week. The rest of the time she spent in and around town. They maintained that suite permanently at the Alexander Hotel, you know, Whit being the chief stockholder, and that's how matters have been going for the past year. Amanda likes people and people like her. To put it simply, she's a democratic and vivacious woman."

"I saw her somewhere once in a white evening gown," the reporter said, "and it made me feel twenty years younger."

"She doesn't intentionally exploit her assets," the lawyer said defensively. "She just has a superb naturalness about the facts of physiology. The health of innocence, almost."

"But not quite, is it, Billy?"

"Well, from what I hear, she's done a mite of philandering this past year. I can't say that I blame her, either. Life with the wonderful Whitman Pitt can be slow suffocation. I know from personal experience."

"Some of my financial contacts tell me he's lately taken to drink."

"That's true, Sam. He's always been a moderate drinker, guardedly so, but now he touches the stuff at noon."

"He knew what's been going on, then?"

"He sure did. But even his jealousy wasn't normal. I know him well enough to know how he reasoned. He had bought a piece of goods that was proving to be of inferior quality because it was in heavy demand by the masses. The fact that certain lesser men had access to this piece was, in consequence, steadily depreciating the value of all his other possessions. He was becoming the laughingstock of his social and business circles and yet he had to maintain iron control and do nothing about it. He really needed a drink. Needed it badly."

"Was he loaded last night, Billy?"

"Not so you could notice it. He carries it cool."

"But the gun was loaded, wasn't it, Billy?"

"For a guy who's supposed to be writing a book on high finance, Sam, you seem to be researching the police blotter unnecessarily."

"Funny thing, Billy, there's nothing about a gun on the police blotter. But a couple of bellhops told our legman they heard a shot in the Pitt suite just before he jumped out the window. A fix, I figure."

"Let me set the record straight, off the record, Sam. He didn't jump out the window. He fell."

"Whatever, he was damn lucky he was only three floors up with a canopy to break his fall. So you were the man in the middle up there, Billy?"

"Purely in my capacity as attorney for Mrs. Pitt. She wants a divorce and wished to show me the evidence. I mean it, Sam, the whole truth."

"I haven't said anything."

"It's the dubious look on your face. But listen carefully, Sam, because what I'm about to tell you may never get outside a divorce referee's chambers. When the Pitts were on their honeymoon in Mexico City, Whit persuaded Amanda to accompany him to the office of one Dr. Georgio Ruba—not a bona fide doctor—where she was administered a shot of pentothal on the pretext of its being a cholera vaccine. Upon reviving, she discovered that, two inches below the cutest navel in Florida, she had been tattooed in violet ink with her old hubby's monogram. Now how about that?"

"No wonder they laughed when his wife said yes," the reporter said with a shake of his head.

"Well, she was giving me a lot of background in the hotel suite last night and was in the act of showing me proof of the tattoo part of her story, when Whit barged in. Partly drunk and partly insane but cold as ice. Without so much as a word,

he strode across the room pulling a pistol from his pocket. It stuck for a few seconds on the pocket flap and that gave me a chance to get a hand on his wrist.

"We grappled like a couple of slobs for a few more seconds. Then the gun went off. We found the bullet later in the bookcase. But at the moment I recoiled so strongly from the sound of the shot that I spun Whit across the room, and out the window he went with glass, sash and curtains. Damnedest sight I ever saw in my life. I'll never forget it!"

"I can well believe it," the reporter said.

The lawyer suddenly looked at his wristwatch. "Time to go, Sam. Can't keep my new client waiting." He turned the key in the ignition and began to back out of the parking stall.

"When can I break the divorce story, Billy?"

"As soon as we've finalized the grounds, Sam."

"And what about your own plans after that, Billy? This state won't hold you and Pitt, both."

"I've been thinking of that all day, Sam. Since last night. And I realize I'll have to go. Back north probably, maybe even back to New Haven. But you know, for the first time in a long time I don't give a damn, because it's possible, just barely possible, that when the time comes I may have reason to be glad that Whit Pitt and I have the same initials."

"I was wondering about that," the reporter said. "Off the record."

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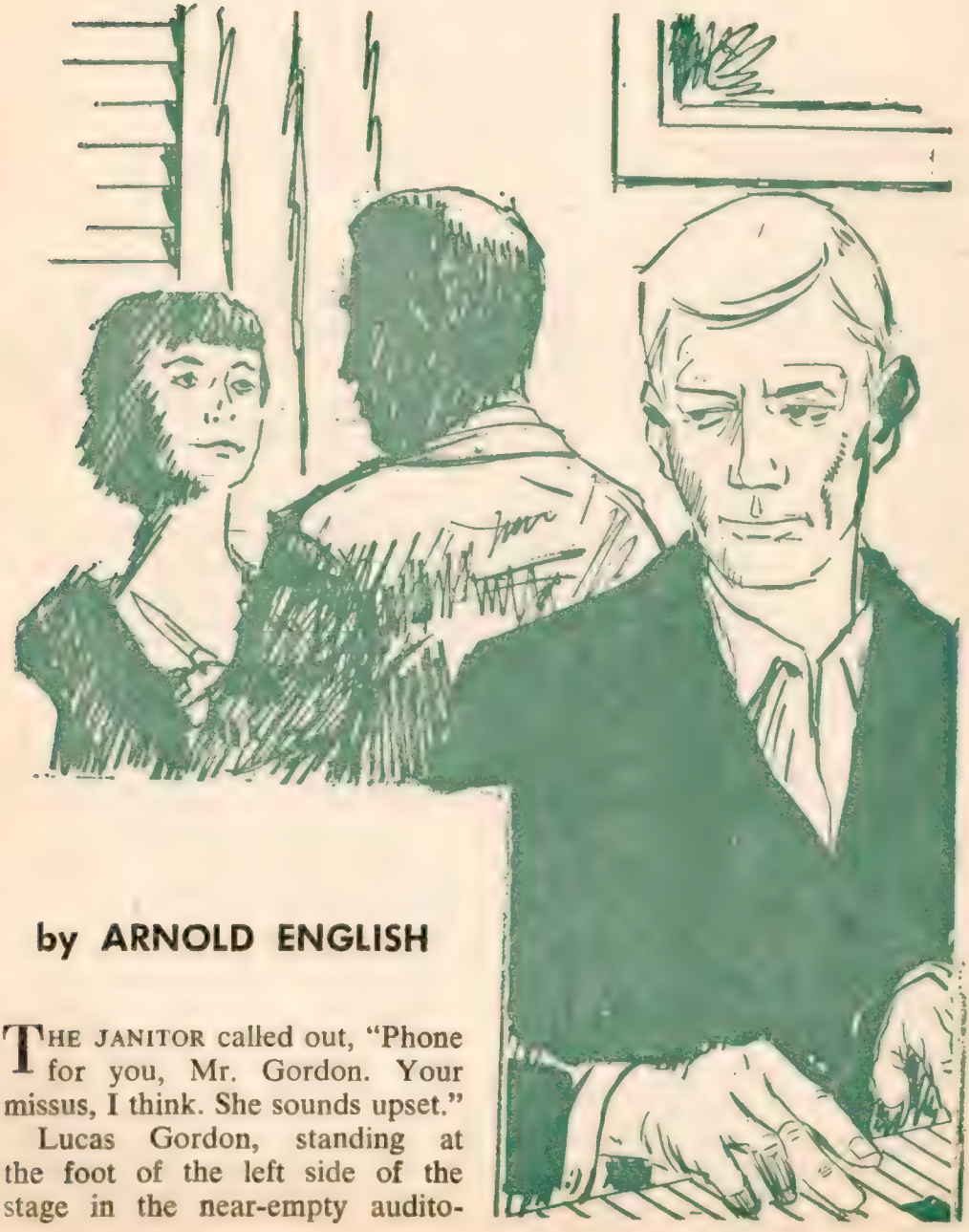
PLAY FOR TIME

One last fragment of song they had given him. When it ended, he died. Unless . . .



by ARNOLD ENGLISH

THE JANITOR called out, "Phone for you, Mr. Gordon. Your missus, I think. She sounds upset."

Lucas Gordon, standing at the foot of the left side of the stage in the near-empty audito-

rium, nodded to show that he'd heard. With a deft move he picked up the piano score from the lectern and jammed it into a brown leather briefcase, which he zipped shut. He glanced at the small motion picture screen, then turned and strode up the aisle.

"It's the lobby phone, Mr. Gordon." The janitor, sweeping lazily toward the center aisle, turned up a pair of seats before glancing short-sightedly at him. "Good movie tonight. Who was that pretty girl in the picture?"

"Her name was Theda Bara," Gordon said, throwing the words over a shoulder. "She always played the part of a loose woman in silent movies."

Not till he was out of the janitor's sight and close to the pay phone did Gordon run over to it and scoop up the receiver.

"Hello? Hello?"

The connection had been broken on the other end. Gordon sighed, put the receiver back in place, and pattered into the washroom. Here he combed his steel-gray hair in a mirror that was fully as big as an envelope. Then he washed his dead-white face and dried it, and flicked some dust off his suit. The seat of his pants didn't look shiny as yet, as a contortionist view assured him.

He let a taxi go past as soon as he got outside and started walking the six blocks to his home, but did it at a faster pace than usual. As it happened, he had to stop for a minute when a cheerful elderly woman walked up to him and said coyly:

"I wonder when the Old Movie Society is going to run the picture I requested."

"Which one is that?"

"My special favorite—*Little Lord Fauntleroy,* with Mary Pickford."

Gordon said that it would be run in a very few weeks but that no date had been set by the management. He preferred saying that to telling the woman that no print of the film was available. Gordon always preferred to suggest by his attitude that everything was under control.

Just as his key ground into the lock of his apartment door, the door was opened abruptly by his wife. Frieda was a surprisingly youthful looking woman with only a few wrinkle-lines on her freckled face. A pair of lightning-shaped red blotches had appeared on her cheeks for the second time since Gordon had known her.

"Lou, somebody who knows about us has been—"

"Just a minute." He closed the door so that the two of them wouldn't be overheard from the hallway, and gestured her into the living room. One of the candles on the black wooden table suddenly flickered and blew out, leaving a blot across the middle section of the table and throwing the other

candle's light into greater sharpness.

"Let's not run away again, Lou." She sniffed and took the big monogrammed handkerchief he passed across. "You were acquitted. A jury said you hadn't done anything wrong or unjustified."

"What's happened now?" he asked, trying to keep his voice level. "You still haven't told me that much."

"I was out shopping a little while ago," she said after a foghorn-blast into a handkerchief. "Just as I was turning a street corner, I saw a man staring at me. I know that kind of stare. I saw in the court when you were tried. And this fellow even looked like the man you—well, Lou, you know who I mean."

"What did you do about it?"

"I started to walk away and I thought I lost him. Then I came home and phoned you. While I was phoning I heard our doorbell ring and ring. I got scared and hung up. Later the doorman told me somebody had been around to ask for us. I told him not to let anybody in, not tonight."

"In that case, we don't have to worry." Gently he stroked her blonde hair and then her back, his sensitive fingers arching at the shoulder blades. His face was without expression. "Tonight I'm going to take our minds off it by doing some work. In case you've forgotten, the Old Movie Society has booked *Variety* in two weeks, and I have to work out a musical score."

"You'll be busy, then."

"You can help me with the stop watch this time. I've got to score practically every frame for playing differently. *Variety* is probably the best directing job that Dupont ever did, but so many German silents in the twenties were cut for speed so, as to make for very few frames to the sequence; and to score it is—"

He went on talking, as though Frieda's presence at the scoring wouldn't be an added difficulty and he'd had every intention of working for the balance of the night.

He glanced up quickly as the doorbell rang, drawing a hand away from her back. Sweat lined his forehead, and he started rubbing his hands together nervously.

"I'll get it, Frieda. I only hope it isn't what I've been half-afraid would—well, never mind! I'm sure it'll be all right."

He walked slowly into the foyer and opened the door on a thin-dark-haired small man.

"I'm coming in," the man snapped.

Gordon had a moment to stare at that dark, hard face. It reminded him of a certain other man's face, and he knew from the resemblance alone that he was facing a man whose appearance he had been dreading for a long time.

"I'm Tom Wales," the newcomer said. "That last name ought to ring a bell with you."

"Yes, of course." Gordon had a vague wonder that he could be so polite.

"So you remember my brother Sid," Tom Wales said quietly. "I didn't think you'd remember a guy once you had killed him."

"Your brother tried to force himself on my wife and I defended her."

"You killed Sid and you know it."

"A jury agreed that I was justified. In the circumstances I didn't choose to engage in hand-to-hand combat."

Tom Wales drew the back of a hand across his pudgy lips. Frieda had come into the hall, eyes widening at sight of the man who looked so much like Sid Wales.

"Hi, baby," Tom Wales said. "I knew I was following the right broad when I followed you. Even the doorman of this building recognized you from the slight description I could give him."

Gordon said, "I thought the doorman wouldn't let you come in."

"There's a back way." Wales' lips parted on yellow-tinged teeth.

"You've taken a lot of trouble," Gordon said.

"Yeh, sure. Ever since you were let go and you left town. I had private eyes on your trail, but they couldn't find you. I guess you changed your name and the way you make a living, but I always knew I'd track you sooner or later. It's taken me five years."

"You're a persistent man as well as a vengeful one." Gordon sighed. "I'm surprised you can recognize my wife. She looks much older, I think, than she did at the time."

Wales looked at Frieda, exactly as Gordon had hoped. But he suddenly pulled out a knife and took two steps across the floor, to where he could point the knife at Frieda's stomach.

"Put down that dingus you're carrying, Gordon, or I let your wife have it good."

Gordon didn't hesitate. He set the tray down to the floor, easing it down as if it was an everyday household chore.

"That's a lot more like it, pal," Tom Wales said. "You can stand up now."

Gordon did so, as quietly as he could. He had fallen back against the wall as if he'd lost his balance. Actually he was standing before the bell that connected downstairs. He pushed his back against the wall slowly, then forward, then again back. If only he could attract the doorman's attention—

"Get away from there!" Wales rasped.

Gordon didn't have any choice, not if he wanted to live for even a little longer. He moved away.

"The doorbell, huh?" Wales

asked. "I can guess what you were figuring. You ring three longs, three shorts and three more longs in that order and somebody downstairs thinks it means S.O.S. Right?"

"I suppose anybody who works day and night for five years to be revenged on someone who did nothing he could avoid is bound to have a melodramatic mind."

"Forget that," Wales said. "Come into the next room. If the doorman buzzes from down there, you won't be able to answer him."

Gordon kept his face rigid and followed the man into the living room, where the piano stood.

"Do you want some money for leaving us alone?" Gordon asked. "If you do, I'll write out a check."

"I'll take any cash you've got."

"In return for leaving my wife and me alone?" Gordon asked. He broke the silence that followed by saying softly, "We don't keep enough in the house to be worth anybody's while. I'd be glad to write out a check, in the circumstances."

"I bet you would," Wales snorted. "If I take a check, I won't be able to cash it afterwards. Just having it will be a giveaway."

"I see." Gordon's voice was admirably calm. "I take it that you plan to kill me."

"That's why I've been hunting you down for the last five years."

"And my wife?"

"She has to get it, too," Wales

said. "I can't let her go around talking. Now you've had enough time to get used to what's going to happen, which is a lot more than you gave my brother. But it's part of what they call mental anguish."

"Very picturesque," Gordon said lightly. "I suppose you'll blindfold me and shoot as a one-man firing squad. No, you've got a knife. At any rate you should be writing bad movies."

Wales flushed, but said, "You're the coolest cat I ever did see, bar nobody. Okay, here—"

"No wait! I—since you want to do this in a ritualistic way, well then I have a last request."

Wales nodded slowly. "Okay, what do you want? Provided it don't take too much time."

"I'd like to play a last selection to my wife on the piano," Gordon said.

"The hell you say! I'm not having any—oh, now, wait a minute here."

"What?" Gordon hoped he looked puzzled.

"You think you're going to fool

me, huh?" Wales demanded with savage satisfaction. "You think that if you play something on the piano it'll be heard and somebody will come running up here to help you two. Isn't that right?"

Gordon couldn't help looking astonished. "I really think that you're the one who ought to be playing accompaniments to old movies. When it comes to hokum, I'm just not in the same league with you."

"No games now," Wales said. "I'll let you go through with it, but if you try and double-cross I'll make the finish painful for the two of you. That's a promise."

Gordon said nothing.

"First of all, I'm going to make sure nothing goes wrong. You won't have no chance to signal nobody for help after I get through. I'm going to search the piano to find out if there's anything in it that might set off a signal of some kind."

He did it quietly but carefully.

"Next I got a few conditions to make," Wales said, still brandishing the knife. "First of all, you'd better play soft. When you hit one loud note, I'll hit, too—with this!"

He raised the knife briefly. Frieda gasped as if hurt, then moved her body back as if she was going to sit down.

"Better not go away from where you're standing," Wales said. He turned to Gordon. "Second of all, you're not going to play no tune unless I've heard of it and know the title. That's definite."

Gordon couldn't help asking politely, "Why do you want it that way?"

"You might play some kind of a signal tune to somebody."

"You've got a very melodramatic mind," Gordon said as if talking about a mutual acquaintance.

"Yeah. And one other thing," Wales said. He moved briskly and with one foot closed the door that connected this room to the hallway.

"What is it?"

"You were buzzing downstairs before," Wales said, "and for all I know you might want to play some special tune in some kind of a code. I don't want anybody to hear you outside of this room."

He made sure that the windows were closed before turning back.

Gordon's lips tightened, but he made no other sign. He hadn't felt so uncomfortable since—well, not the jury trial because he knew what he'd done had been justified—no, since he'd missed a scene accompaniment during a showing of *The Last Command.* He'd been watching the screen casually and alternating his sight of it with the sight of his score; and as a result he had played some "action" music at the start of a love scene between William Powell and Evelyn Brent.

Breath rasped in Gordon's lungs

as he raised his fingers. He wouldn't admit to himself that he was at all excited.

"One more thing," Wales said quickly. "I don't want you playing no extra notes. No 'special arrangement' kind of thing. It might be a signal in some way, for all I know."

"That hardly makes much difference now," Gordon said.

He played softly and easily, having chosen *It's All Right With Me.* His playing was as simple and direct as Wales could have wanted. The tune did have some association between himself and Frieda. They had first danced to that tune after they met.

"Two minutes," Wales called out while playing.

Gordon nodded briskly and kept on.

Wales called out, "Finish."

Gordon came to the end of it in a few moments. Wales had already raised his knife.

There was no help for it, Gordon knew. He had to fight now. The impeccable Lucas Gordon was going to fight for his life in just a moment.

As Wales lunged at him, Gordon met the assault. He had desperation on his side, but no strength. Frieda had joined the melee, hitting the top of Wales' head with something that was supposed to stun him but didn't have any effect. He shook her off and jabbed an elbow into her side, forcing her back and away from them. Frieda fell to the floor.

Gordon heard her fall at the same time as he was trying to keep Wales' knife from piercing him. He heard something else, too. There was pressure against the door. Wales was fighting furiously and had just freed the knife hand when police arrived and took away a stunned and staring Wales.

"You couldn't 'a called 'em," he said just before he was led out. You couldn't."

Frieda, recovered as best she could, said, "It really was impossible for you to signal for help."

"Not with the piano, of course," Gordon agreed. "But Wales looked for the complicated answer, the melodramatic foolishness although the truth was really very simple. I had dreaded this kind of situation, you know, and I'd arranged with the doorman that if he ever heard three rings from the downstairs bell, he should instantly call the police. I knew that Wales was the sort who'd grant a so-called last request, you see, Frieda; and all I was doing was to play for time."

A NEW COMPLETE LONG MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET NEXT MONTH

AN UNUSUALLY EXCITING NOVELET

SLOT FOR A KILLER

He'd taken my money, my sister's life, my wife's love, and there wasn't anything I could do about it. And then, one dark night, I found there was . . .

by CARL HENRY RATHJEN

IT ALL STARTED, Larry, when I bought Junior a slot-car racing layout for his twelfth birthday. If I'd had any idea it was going to lead to a killing—I mean, a thought of a killing . . .

Never mind what you heard me say first. Forget it, Larry. Don't start butting into my good family life the way my no-good brother-in-law, Sam Baxter, did. All right then, I just said I had no idea that slot cars were going to lead to the *thought* of a killing.

The only thought I'd had in mind then was how grown-up the things are for kids nowadays. In my day I thought it was something to get a spring-wound tin car to put down on the floor and just squat there and watch it go bumping into furniture legs and walls.

Now the kids get two or more cars at once, plastic models scaled to one-twenty-fourth of real racing and stock car jobs and with just as much *go* in proportion; a track to race them on, oval or scaled replicas of famous race courses like Riverside, Sebring, Le Mans—each kid, or grown-up kid, with a hand control for acceleration and braking, electrically "driving" his own car via a contact slot like the old New York trolley cars used to have between the rails.

Souped up electric motors in each car, precision gears and axles, brakes, tire changes, tool kits.

Toys? Unlike us who just played, nowadays kids Junior's age have to learn to be mechanics, electrical whizzes and . . .

All right, Larry, you know all that. Then stop shunting me off my track of thought with interruptions.

Where was I? Oh, Junior's birthday. Marianne and I had my younger sister, Joadie, and her husband, Sam, over for the evening. Like I said, I'd given the kid the racing lay-out, and we all tried racing each other with the little plastic cars. I'm glad they were just toys, the way we kept spinning out and flipping off the track. But Junior really got the feel.

His car ran away from the field, all except Sam's car. I should have known what was coming, the way Sam squinted as he got the hang of it better and better. You know, believe it or not, it really takes skill to whip those little cars around a slot layout. Anyway, I should have been warned by the look on Sam's big flabby face.

Baxter's a calculating operator, I should have reminded myself, especially since I'd once caught him doctoring dice and also discovered he marked decks of cards as well. I never mentioned those to anybody. After all, he was my brother-in-law.

Joadie had married him while I was away in the army. She still had stars in her eyes and big brother wasn't going to be the louse to pluck them out. Next after Marianne I'd protect Joadie with my life.

What do you mean by that crack, Larry? Maybe that has something to do with what happened. Oh, just a *thought* like I said mine was, huh? Okay, keep it that way.

Anyway, after the women dropped out of the racing, Sam suggested a side bet that he could beat Junior in a race. Junior overheard him and I could see he was expecting his old man to have faith in him. Anyway, Sam hadn't had a chance to doctor the cars, so I agreed. We started at a nickel a race. Pretty soon it was ten cents. Then two bits. Then fifty cents. And, since Junior was winning most of the races, I agreed to up the side bets to a buck.

Then Marianne, reaching down to the candy box on the floor beside us, spotted the exchange of dough and suggested we were setting a bad example for Junior.

"Okay," said Sam with unusual magnanimity, "just give us a chance to break even all around and we'll call it quits."

He began winning. Junior seemed to have lost his touch or his car its oomph or something. Then it flipped off the track and as I picked it up to put it back in its slot my finger, underneath the car, felt something sticky.

I turned the car over and found a smear of caramel on the gears. Junior goes for cream fillers, not caramels, so I looked at Sam and remembered he'd been wiping his hand on a handkerchief a few minutes ago just after retrieving Junior's car for him. Sam was very intent on his own car going around the track.

I spoke to Junior, but kept on looking at Sam Baxter.

"Your car needs a lube job. Will fix." I got to my feet and shook my head at Junior, who was going to go with me. "Help your mother clean up the birthday wrappings." Sam was starting to get up. "You'd better grab the chance to do some practicing."

I was almost ready to let him have a blast right there in front of Joadie, but caught myself before I kicked the stars down. I went alone to my shop in the garage just beyond the kitchen.

As you know by now, Larry, which is why we got together, I've got a way with gadgets the same as Junior has a feel for making them perform.

After all, it's the way I earn a living.

Anyway, I got to work on that car fast. I didn't bother cleaning the gumminess off the gears. I took them out, and then rummaged in a box filled with parts from electric shavers, mechanical toys, hair dryers, food blenders, and such. It didn't take me long to fit and change the gear ratio of Junior's car. I went back in the house with it.

I muttered to Junior, "Take it easy now, kid. You've had a crash, sort of. Don't crowd it until you've got the feel."

I winked. Junior grinned, probably figuring I wanted him to build up Sam for a killing side bet. Maybe it wasn't right to make my kid a foil, but that's the way things go sometimes and anyway I wanted to give the kid a chance to make a comeback for the dirty tactics Sam had pulled on him.

Junior took it easy for a couple of go-arounds, then he let the car have it. . .

The plastic racer flipped off on the next turn and went tumbling under the divan.

"Man!" Junior began, gaping at me.

I cut him off. "Ready, Sam?" I challenged.

Marianne reminded me, "Just to even it up, that's all."

Sam Baxter couldn't back off, though he was plenty suspicious.

He and the kid raced, and it was a one-way street for the dough, from Sam to me.

After Sam and Joadie left, Junior wanted to know what I'd done to his car.

"I fixed it," I said, and told him it was time for bed.

Marianne asked me too when we were getting ready to turn in. I told her, because she's the only one who knows how I feel about

Sam. She feels that way too, but keeps quiet because of Joadie, who she regards like a real sister.

"Good," she said. "I hope you taught him a lesson. But don't let it go any farther, the gambling, I mean. And don't tell Junior. He loves Joadie, tells her more than he tells me, and if he ever let this slip

to her—" Marianne sighed. "She's too nice to be crushed like that."

I nodded. "Almost as nice as the girl I married."

But fixing that slot-car had started something, Larry. You know how slot-car racing took hold, more than any other fad that's swept this country. Big layouts began to appear, especially in California in former super-markets and factory buildings.

It wasn't long before the living-room layout was too tame for Junior and me. We began dropping in at the Raceway near here, and then going to your new Speed Hall across town. With that fine touch he had, Junior could really let himself go on those big layouts. As you know, at first we rented cars for him.

Then we bought a couple of those build-it-yourself kits. Along about the time when slot-car racing began organizing like real sports car racing, with regional, divisional, and national races, I began building cars from scratch for Junior so he could keep on bringing home trophies.

Marianne even sewed him some gold and black racing shirts. Her only concern was that when he got older he might want to go into full scale racing and get himself killed. I told her there was no need to worry about that yet.

She would have been worried if she'd known what was going on. Yeah, side bets. Sam was going places in slot-car racing too, and making bets on the side. I know, I'd promised Marianne the night of Junior's birthday, but the kid had a winning touch and I saw a chance to build up a nest-egg to finance manufacturing and selling the things I'd been building into his cars. He was always winning, wasn't he, so where was I taking any chances betting on him?

Sam had similar ideas. He and I would go partners. But I wanted no part of Sam. It was pretty hard to keep finding excuses to turn him down when Joadie was all for it. I still couldn't tell my kid sister that some day the stars were going to come crashing down on her.

Even though Sam couldn't drive a straight road, I'll say one thing for him. When he gets an idea in that sneaky mind nothing will pry him loose from it, except death.

Larry, I'm not trying to cover up anything about what happened to Sam. I wouldn't be telling you, would I, if it was anything more than just a thought about a killing. All right then. Let me finish, and stop looking for hidden meanings in what I'm saying.

Well, I kept building the cars for Junior and he kept winning slot races, and I kept winning quiet side bets from Sam whenever he and Junior were competing in the same races.

Sam took it in good spirit and didn't bring up the subject again of going partners in manufacturing slot cars. He really threw me off-guard. He'd meet me in the washroom before races, or phone me at work to set up the side bets.

We were up to fifty bucks a race, and sometimes a hundred, before he began winning a little more often, then still more consistently despite the way I'd souped up Junior's cars. I should have had sense enough to quit when we were even, back where I'd started.

Sure, Larry, I'd had offers from manufacturers to sell them my ideas, but I figured there would be more of a take if I could handle the whole thing myself. So I kept trying to recoup the nest-egg I had lost, and I was getting in too deep, borrowing from the bank account and, I'm ashamed to say, not telling Marianne about a raise in salary I'd received.

But no matter how super Junior's cars were, always running away from the rest of the pack, Sam's stayed right with him and kept nosing him out.

I told you Sam had a touch. Besides, I'd seen Sam Baxter with a guy who was reported to be as good as I was with gadgets. So I figured Sam had a good mechanic, the same as Junior.

Then, one afternoon at work, when I'd been stewing about the financial quagmire that was sucking me down, the boss said I didn't look good, figured I'd been working too hard and insisted that I take the rest of the afternoon off. When I got home early, Sam and Joadie's car was in the driveway. I didn't think anything of it.

Sam had bought her a sewing machine, and she'd been coming over a lot of afternoons so Marianne could teach her how to sew without biting off the end of her tongue.

I went inside. The house looked as though a tornado had blown in a lot of debris. Thread and snips of cloth all over the carpet; chunks of cloth and flimsy paper patterns. I gave each of my two gals a smooch, alibied for why I was home early, and then noticed there was just us in the house.

"When did you learn to drive a car?" I asked Joadie.

"I didn't," she said, working at a seam. "Sam brought me over, the way he always does."

"Where is he?"

"Around somewhere," Joadie answered without looking up.

Marianne looked up, startled, her gaze shifted toward the rear of the house. I moved casually, until I was out of Joadie's sight, then I shifted into high gear.

In the garage, at my work bench, I found Sam. His mechanic was with him and was making measurements and drawings of my newest car for Junior.

"So this is how you've been beating us," I snapped. "Stealing our own—"

Sam gave me a dirty look. "That's a lousy word to use to a member of the family."

I let that go for the moment and moved toward the mechanic.

"You're not a member of the family."

He left me a nice set of calipers when he took off from the garage and over the back fence. That left me alone with Sam. You'd think that even a guy like him, caught like that, would be apologetic. Not Sam Baxter.

"Before you sound off," he warned me, "just don't forget how much dough you owe me."

"Who owes who?" I retorted. "Sue me for it! And when any judge and jury hears how you tricked me into—"

With a shrug, he flipped that right off. "Then it means you don't care if Joadie knows? And what about Marianne finding out how far you're in?"

He stuffed the threats right back down my throat.

Sam smiled.

"You'd better pay up now, if you can. Or better yet, take me into partnership."

"You'll get paid," I said through my teeth.

Sam rested his hand on a hammer before he spoke again.

"Don't try to blow your top at me." His voice shook a little and he moved farther away from me. "I'm going to get that partnership, if not full control. You just remember that. If you get any ideas of trying to sell any of your inventions to raise the dough, you'd have to get Marianne's signature too in this state, tell her the whole story And even if she agreed, I'd file a claim of prior interest to stop the sale."

He gave me a crooked grin. "You know, it's not legal to gamble on slot car races, so various chits you've given me for money owed are really advances to finance your inventions—"

"You're going to get paid, in cash," I repeated. "And if you aren't out of this garage without another word, that hammer isn't going to do you any good."

He didn't have the guts to challenge me. He let go of the hammer, backed a few steps, then made a wide circle around me and out of the garage. Outside the door his courage returned. He called in to me.

"When are you going to make payment?"

"It will be in the same length of time," I snapped, "that it took you to finagle this set-up."

When I finally went in the house, Joadie was gathering up her sewing.

"What's the rush, dear?" she was saying to Sam, who had his hand on the front door knob. She looked at me, saw something that made her frown, but Marianne diverted her by reminding her of something to watch out for in doing darts.

Sam and Joadie left.

Then Junior arrived home from school.

It was well into the evening before Marianne could ask me what had happened. I didn't dare let on how much I owed Sam, but just said I'd caught him stealing our slot-car ideas.

I added that all the places where I took Junior were clean, good family spots. I also said that, to play safe from now on, we would no longer leave Junior's latest car in the garage. We'd keep it in the safe I'd inherited from my father. So I got to work building a plush-lined box for it that would fit in the safe in the den.

I felt like a heel, not telling Marianne about my debts, but I would after they were cleared up. I was sure they would be cleared up now, because with Sam no longer able to steal our gimmicks he wouldn't stand a chance against Junior.

So what did the rat do? He began avoiding us, giving me no chance to make winning side bets to get out from under. So I began phoning him at the loan office where he works.

"We race tonight," I'd say, and he'd sidestep. I even tried to arrange it through Joadie once—just a family get-together at the race track—but Sam had already primed her and when she started to innocently bring up the subject of partnership for me and Sam it was dangerous ground and I cut the conversation short.

She phoned Marianne about it. What was wrong between Sam and me? There must be something, because Sam always seemed too busy to bring her over for sewing lessons. Not even for an evening drop-in.

I wasn't getting out of debt. Larry, it was a couple thousand. I didn't know how much longer Sam would keep quiet before turning the screws, or when Marianne might become suspicious and that would bean good-by.

So one afternoon I asked the boss if I could get off early. I felt okay, just had a business matter to attend to. I'd make it up by working overtime or a couple of lunch hours. I met Sam going to his afternoon coffee break and steered him into an alley.

That's right, Larry, that was the night he showed up at your speed

Hall and everyone kidded him about Joadie's explanation that some kids, downtown, had dashed through a revolving door and it had struck Sam in the face. Junior won easily that night and I cleared a hundred bucks off my debt.

With Junior's unknowing help in the weeks that followed I cut the black hole to half its depth. Then the fill-in became erratic. Sam's losing streak stopped and he began beating Junior.

I was going to be in deep again. I couldn't figure it.

One afternoon, a Saturday, I spoke casually to Junior in the garage.

"How are things going at school, kid?"

"Okay, Dad. You saw my report card."

"That's right," I muttered. "Anything else bothering you?"

"No, Dad. It's just—" The kid looked real worried. "It's just that I must be losing my touch or something. I can't seem to win races anymore against Uncle Sam."

I checked his car thoroughly, especially my latest souper-upper. It was a little governor which, when the kid could get the motor up to 40,000 revs on a long straight, would take over and shift gears and really give that car a sprint.

He'd run away from the field, but would have to be careful to ease down sooner before the next turn or his car would rip out of the slot and off the track. We put on new tires, then went down to the Raceway after supper.

The car passed inspection. I was always careful that anything I did was within specifications which were becoming stricter and stricter. No trying to sneak something by for me. My name wasn't Sam Baxter.

Just as I expected. On the long straights, Junior's car sprinted away from the field. But Sam's car stayed right with him!

I gripped the rail. Could Sam be stealing again? I knew his mechanic could copy, but not originate. But how could they copy when the car was always locked in the safe? Only me and Marianne had the combination, and if a guy can't trust his wife . . .

Joadie suddenly spoke beside me. "Sam's come up pretty good, hasn't he? He's doing all right, wouldn't you say?"

"Too good," I said through my teeth.

Joadie gasped, staring at me. "Are you jealous of Sam? Is that what the trouble has been?"

Before I could come out of my shock enough to answer her, she shook her head.

"No, that wouldn't be you. It's —just what is it?"

"Nothing," I said, and knew she didn't believe me. The stars were beginning to fall, and I couldn't watch.

"I got to see Marianne," I said, and turned away fast.

I found Marianne, got her alone, and forgot the other thing that had crept into my mind as I watched Sam's car.

"Joadie's getting wise," I blurted.

"To what?" she asked uneasily.

"To Sam," I said impatiently. "What else do you think?"

Shouting in the hall stopped further conversation. The race was over. Sam had won.

I couldn't get back to Sam and Joadie. I wanted to follow them home to try to put the stars back in place. Marianne gave me all the excuses. It was too far, over the hills to the next town. It was too late and Junior had to be up early the next morning.

"It's not a school night," I began.

"He's going with the O'Learys to church, early, then to a picnic with them." She grasped my arm. "Al, I know why you want to go after Sam and Joadie. But what's the use now? You can't patch something when it's suddenly threadbare and falling apart." I nodded. Marianne seemed greatly relieved. "We've just been kidding ourselves it wouldn't happen sooner or later. She can't be your little sister forever, Al. But if you really want to go—"

"I want to go home with you," I said. "And you're too good for me too."

Marianne didn't react to that the way I thought she would. I wondered if she suspected what had been going on with me and Sam. About an hour later we were getting ready for bed, and that's sometimes a good time for husbands and wives to talk things out.

"Marianne—" I began.

And then the phone rang. She brushed past me.

"I'll get it," I said, thinking it might be a drunk on the line or the slimy guy who'd been calling up women late at night in our town.

It was Sam Baxter.

"You'd better come over," he said brokenly. "It's Joadie. She had to get up—must have been half-asleep. She fell down the stairs—broke her neck."

I was too stunned to ask questions. Had Joadie confronted Sam and then he'd knocked her down in a rage?

It was cold driving over the tricky hill road. When I arrived, the cops and the medical examiner were just about ready to leave. I'd had time to think. I stopped the M.E. as he headed toward his car.

"What's your verdict?"

"Accidental."

"You're sure of that?"

He gave me a look. "Have you any reason to think differently?"

A police inspector had listened in. He and the M.E. began asking questions. I answered as much as I dared.

The inspector gave up on me and decided to go back inside. The M.E. went along too. They gave

Sam a bad time, finally took him downtown and questioned him until they either had to charge or release him. They let him go.

Whenever Sam and I happened to meet after that, he was ugly but careful not to start a fight. I had my suspicions, but I couldn't prove them any more than the police could.

For a while he avoided slot races where Junior and I participated. I heard that he was really winning races elsewhere with a car that was way ahead of the competition. Rumor had it that there was only one car that could hope to beat his. Junior's. People began urging a match. Sam couldn't sidestep it.

The night of the race I wanted to get a look at Sam's car. He insisted on private inspection by the judges before the race. But I saw what I needed to know. Sam's car could do everything that Junior's could. He won the race. Junior tried too hard and spun out three laps before the finish.

It was after that race, Larry, that I sat alone with you in this office and said I was going to ask you a favor.

"You can do me one in return if you think I can do one for you." That was your reply, you'll remember. "Al," you went on pointedly, "I know there's side betting going on, and I want it stopped. Otherwise my place will get a bad name and I'll be closed up."

"I'm not denying it," I said carefully. "And I can promise you the betting will come to a stop if you can do the favor I need." I hesitated. "One of the inspection judges tonight was your brother. I'm not asking to be told anyone's secrets about his car. No details. I just want to know if Sam's car was any different than Junior's."

You looked at me a long time, Larry, then left me alone in the office. Then you came back and closed the door.

"You say this will stop the betting?"

"As far as I'm concerned, given a little time," I replied.

You still didn't give me the answer I wanted. "That's the way I thought it was. I might tell you, confidentially, that our local slot-racing association has been thinking of banning Sam from the tracks."

"For betting?" I asked.

"For a lot of reasons. One of them might be related to the favor you asked me. Another, my personal one, could be that while you were in the army I was close to becoming your brother-in-law."

"Sam?" I asked slowly, "He cut in dirty?"

"I can't prove it," you said.

I felt sick all the way home. You'd given me the answer about Sam's car. I'd been hoping you would give me the wrong one, but you hadn't. That meant there was only one answer to how he could have copied Junior's car which was

kept locked in the safe at home. Marianne! I couldn't believe it. But I had to.

How does a man who loves his wife as I do, ask her something like that? Ask her has she been betraying his trust? Just thinking of asking her made me feel like a heel, when it should have been the other way around. But I couldn't regard it that way.

I even had to force myself to try to observe her reaction when Junior and I got home. Marianne hadn't gone with us to the race. A neighbor's husband was in the hospital and Marianne had stayed with the children so the mother could visit her husband.

When Junior told her he had lost to Uncle Sam's car, Marianne looked as though she had a tight grip on her expression to prevent it from changing.

I spoke slowly. "Junior lost to a car just as good as his." Marianne shot a brief look at me. I made it easy for her and turned to Junior. "The main thing is, kid, win-lose-draw, you drove a clean race. That's all that matters to your old man. Playing it clean."

I carried the plush-lined box into the den and closed the door. I was also telling myself it was time for me to come clean with Marianne, if it would make any difference now.

Time stood awfully still and stark, like a bitterly cold night when there's no wind. I was standing with the plush-lined box open and looking at the car.

"Al," Marianne said behind me. I turned. She stood in the doorway. Her eyes had a very moist, shiny look. Mine felt dry and burning as I stared at her. Marianne quietly closed the door. "Al—"

"Wait." It sounded painful. I looked at the wife I loved, the wife I suspected, the wife who had also trusted me. I pulled out words, one by one. "I think we've both—got quite a few things to say—to each other."

"Al, let me, first."

"No, wait," I repeated. I put the boxed car down carefully. "Before either of us says anything . . ." I moved slowly toward Marianne. Slowly raising my arms, I put them around her. Slowly, she put hers around me. We looked into each other's eyes. Then I put my lips on hers. Our arms tightened.

It was the way it should be with a man and his wife. When I eased off, my eyes were like hers. "That's all I need to know," I said. "It's safe to talk now."

"Yes, Al."

I shook my head. "I won't hold you to anything, after you hear what I have to tell you, what I should have told you long ago. And—"

She interrupted. "I know, Al. I know all about it."

I stared. "About Sam and me?"

"Yes. The amount of money you owe him and—"

"When did you know?" I cut in. "Before or after Joadie died?"

"Before. He told me how much you owed him. I wouldn't believe him, at first." Marianne looked as though she were going to cry hard. "I wouldn't believe him until I looked at the savings account book and also realized you hadn't been giving me any of your pay checks to cash."

I winced. "But you kept quiet about it." Then I glared. "Why the hell didn't you chew me out for being the sneak I was? A fool—"

"Al, I knew you'd been trapped into this by Sam. I wanted to help you get out, but I was afraid to let you know I knew. You had a hard enough time with your anger about Sam and Joadie. And if you'd known he'd told me—"

My hands, clenching until they hurt, confirmed what she was saying.

Marianne nodded. "Sam warned me too about what you might do to him if I told you."

I said something through my teeth that Marianne would never let me say in front of Junior.

"But couldn't you see," I said, "that by keeping silent you were only giving him a chance to get me in deeper?"

"He didn't put it that way, Al." Marianne looked ashamed. "He said he wanted to protect Joadie, the same as you and I. He—he said, that by having a car that would do better—"

"A car like Junior's?"

Marianne nodded, not looking at me. "Then he could win money in other races, not just those against Junior, and that he would apply a percentage of his winnings toward your debt to him."

I said something else through my teeth. "So, thinking you were helping me get out of debt, you let him copy the car."

"Yes, Al. I shouldn't have. But I believed him."

She really cried now. I put my arms around her again.

"You don't have to kiss me," I said. "I'll do the kissing, just to let you know I understand. It's all okay."

"Al, maybe if you told the police now what you didn't tell them the night Joadie died—"

I shook my head. "That inspector guessed pretty close to it. That there was something between me and Sam that Joadie would have insisted on being cleared up if she had lived. What I could tell the inspector now wouldn't add much to help him break Sam down. Sam's got to be made to pay some other way."

I looked at the desk beside the safe. In the top, locked drawer, there was a gun.

Marianne spoke quickly. "Al, couldn't we borrow money?"

"Sam works for a loan company," I reminded her. "I once looked into getting a loan elsewhere. He's loused my credit rat-

ing because he wants to force me into partnership with him."

Marianne's shoulders sagged, then lifted.

"Can't people with debts that are too heavy declare bankruptcy?" she asked.

"Were you brought up to duck responsibilities like that? Anyway, Marianne, it would mean losing everything. This home. My slot-car inventions. Everything, down the drain."

"But, Al, if there's no other way. We could start over somewhere else."

"Not the way we've been planning," I said grimly. "You're forgetting one thing. We've been hoping to cash in on slot-car racing. Let's face it. It's a fad. No one knows how long it will last. We've got to catch the crest of the wave soon." I looked at the desk again. "There's got to be some way to pay off fast."

Marianne grasped my arms and turned me, so she stood between me and the desk. She spoke very quietly.

"I once thought of that too, but it solves nothing. It just makes everything . . . worse. I even told Sam about it once, thinking I could scare him off. He scares easily, Al. But he didn't back off."

I squinted. Though Marianne was close to me, I wasn't seeing her. I saw Sam, nervously grasping the hammer that day I'd caught him in the garage. Sam Baxter did

scare easily at any thought of physical violence.

Marianne tried to stop me as I reached past her toward the desk.

"I just want the phone," I reassured her.

I called you, Larry. "Is Sam still around?" I asked.

"Yes, right here in the office."

I cut in fast. "Don't let on you're speaking to me. Find some way to keep him around until I get down there."

Marianne looked worried as I hung up and closed the car's plush-lined box and tucked it under my arm.

"Al—"

"The less you know, the better," I said, putting my free arm around her. "I'm not going to sell our future short, otherwise I'd take the gun with me. Just trust me."

Marianne went with me through the kitchen and into the garage. I raised the double door. The night

had turned nasty, looking as though it were going to rain or snow or sleet.

"Al, if you must go, drive carefully."

"Very carefully," I said, smiling.

You, Larry, were waiting by the front entrance when I arrived. You pulled me to one side.

"Listen, Al—"

"You listen," I broke in. "There's no time for a lot of conversation. I'm going to make good on that favor I promised you."

"But there's no need to—"

"And I've got one more favor to ask of you. So listen, will you? Slip inside ahead of me. Tell Sam, privately, I'm in an ugly mood. You think I've got a gun. Between you and me, I haven't. It's home. But tell him you think I'm armed."

You looked as though you were going to argue, Larry, until I gave you the clincher.

"You may not exactly regard this as a favor, but something you'd like to assist personally. Because it may produce payment for what happened to Joadie."

You turned and went inside. I followed a few seconds later. Sam saw me coming. I was between him and an exit. I closed in fast. He looked as though he wanted to scream.

"Glad I found you still here, Sam," I said, with the box under my left arm and my right hand near my coat pocket. "I want to clear up this mess, once and for all."

"But—"

"No buts about it," I snapped. "Marianne told me." His thick lips moved, but no sound came out. "So we're going to race," I told him. "You should like the odds. You've got a car as good as mine, but you've got better driving ability. We'll go in Larry's office first and let him hold the stakes."

I didn't give either of you a chance to talk.

"I win, my debt to you is wiped out. If you win, partnership. If it's a draw—"

You squinted at me, Larry. Sam was going to say something to you, but I let my hand start into my pocket.

"Okay," Sam muttered. A gleam was beginning to appear in his eyes which told me he was thinking of the odds in his favor.

"Larry," I said as we left the office, "let's not call attention to this race, give anyone the idea there might be a stake involved."

You nodded and got us placed in an event with six other cars. Sam's car and mine were in adjoining slots. A couple of the other contestants were real drivers from sports car racing. They wanted to know how come I suddenly had decided to drive my son's car.

"I got a sudden hankering to live dangerously." That got a good laugh. When it died, I added, "At least, if I crash out here, I won't break my neck."

Sam shot a look at me. I looked

straight back. The gleam in his eye began to fade. His flabby cheeks became fish-belly.

He had no time to decide anything. The race started.

I didn't try to take the lead. I let Sam have it, and kept my car a little behind his. Our two cars slowly drew ahead of the pack. He was too nervous to have the fine touch and was playing it cautious. Even with my lack of driving experience I could have passed him with Junior's car, but I didn't.

I just crept up enough to place the cars side by side. He started to draw ahead. I stayed with him.

His blue car and my red one went into a turn with him on the outside. He played it cautious. I didn't. Giving the red car full gun, I let it hit the turn so hard it whipped out of its slot. It rammed Sam's car. Both of them sprawled across the track. Some of the pack crashed us. I heard remarks about my novice abilities.

With the cars back in the slots, we all began chasing the leaders. But I chased only Sam's car. On another turn I spun out again and knocked him from the slot. He started to look at me, but changed his mind. When his car was slotted, he took off. I went after him, but sput out. He got way ahead.

Trying to overtake him, I spun out again. I just didn't have the skill to catch him.

So I backed off, cut my speed. Too late he realized that I'd let him lap me. I picked up speed right alongside his car again. A turn to the right, with me outside. A short straight. Then a left turn with his car on the outside. I hit it hard and piled up both cars again.

Twice more I clobbered him, and the last time knocked his car off the track to the floor.

Sam had had enough. For a big guy he scooted fast, scooped up his car and headed for the door. My car was slotted. I took it easy, because my attention was on Sam. I completed the required laps. Though I hadn't won the race, I'd beat Sam. My debt could be regarded as finished—maybe. But he still had a debt to pay.

I got my car, put it in the box, endured some jibes about my dangerous driving as I strolled toward the door.

It was a murky night, couldn't make up its mind whether it wanted to snow or rain, so it had settled for sleet, glinting in slanting lines past lights, shining on cars tops and pavements. Sam's car was just slithering out of the parking lot as I came out of the hall.

I went to my car casually, started it, turned on the defroster, wipers, and lights, then drove out and carefully headed for home in the opposite direction from that taken by Sam.

A block away I made my usual right turn. Then I hit the gas. I may not be too good on the slot cars, mainly because I'd left it to

Junior and hadn't bothered to get the feel, but that doesn't go for man-size jobs. Before I married I used to wheel a rig over the mountains on scheduled freight haul, come rain or shine.

I wheeled my car now, took slippery corners at a speed which would have got me a citation in dry weather. There weren't going to be many cops, despite their training, who would be able to catch me tonight.

Soon I'd roundabouted to the road toward the hills. Sam's road home. I spotted taillights ahead and drew close enough to identify Sam's car. Then I dropped back, just keeping the lights in sight.

The road climbed, narrowed, then leveled. It went past viewpoints and summertime picnic spots. Just as Sam's car passed the last turn-out before starting down I overtook him and drew alongside enough to let him recognize my car.

I glimpsed his startled, then terrified face.

He jerked the wheel. His car skidded. I dropped back to give him room to regain control. But I stayed close behind him.

A turn loomed out of the murk. A turn where our lane would be on the outside, with a drop below. Nudging the gas, I started to go alongside him, with the drop on his other side.

Just like the slot-car race!

Sam Baxter spurted his car ahead. I followed. Another turn. I started alongside, but a tanker laboring up forced me behind Sam.

He drove down faster. I stayed with him. He began weaving, swinging out to block me each time I tried to come alongside. He was having a devil of a time to keep his car under control. I could have overtaken and crashed him plenty of times. I just let him think I was *trying* but was having my own troubles with control on the icy going. Sooner or later I might make it, and then—

Terror overcame his caution. He bore down toward one of those turns they always call Deadman's Curve. I crowded right after him, then began dabbing my brakes when I knew he was going fast enough.

He saw it too. His stop lights blazed as he made the mistake of hitting his brakes hard.

His wheels locked. He lost all control. Metal screeched along the parapet. He spun across the pavement, gouged the inside shoulder.

In a crazy whirl he re-crossed the pavement at the far end of the curve and this time, instead of sideswiping the parapet, he hit it square on. His car flipped over the top, then plummeted from sight—down, down, down to the rocks four hundred feet below.

I barely avoided preventing my car from becoming marked as I fought on around the turn. Fortunately no car came up for the driver or passengers to later identify

my car as one they had seen on that stretch of road. I took a roundabout way home, driving carefully to avoid any fender brushes.

Marianne was waiting up. She looked worried, relieved, questioning. She clung to me as I kissed her.

"Junior's a better slot-car driver than I am," I said. "It's time to go to bed."

We were awake, in each other's arms, when the phone rang. A voice identified itself as a police officer.

"I'm very sorry to have to inform you—"

I spoke in a shocked tone to Marianne. My hand didn't quite cover the phone. The officer was waiting.

"It's about Sam," I told Marianne. "He had an accident in his car. He was killed."

I spoke into the phone. "I'll get dressed. Where do you want me to go to identify the body?"

I'd just finished the identification when the inspector, the one who had investigated Joadie's death, asked if he could speak to me. I was scared inside, until he said my car would do, rather than his official one. He mentioned that he'd heard about the slot-car racing that night.

"Quite a coincidence," he said.

"Yeah," I agreed slowly. "If I hadn't gone straight home I'd almost think I should have a guilty conscience."

Sleet spattered on the car windows while he looked at me. "I guess your sister's death will have to stay in the records as accidental, now that your brother-in-law has also died—accidentally."

I got all choked up, but managed to say, "Yeah, I guess—"

He slapped my knee. "Thanks for your co-operation. Maybe, if you get a chance sometime, you'd fix up a car, a slot-car, for my boy."

"It's as good as done."

Well, that's it, Larry. Have you got any more questions about a *thought* of a killing?

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Murderer's Holiday

by JOHN REESE

He was our enemy and he must die before this day ended. How? And by whose hands? Perhaps another enemy would give us the answer . . .

FROM HIS SEAT in the drapes at the window, Noonan said suddenly, "Here comes our boy!"

Both of the other men reached for the binoculars. D. H. Sharp, of the Central Intelligence Agency, got them. But on second thought he handed them to Chadjowski, saying, "Go ahead, but don't let him detect you. Those fellows are conditioned to look for surveillance."

"You're telling me!" Chadjowski said, in a thick Russian accent.

"Know him?" Sharp murmured.

Chadjowski lowered the glasses.

"No, but he will know me. There will be a moment of embarrassment between us, all on his part. Then—disillusionment!"

Sharp took the glasses. The man was nearing the hotel now. Sharp had only a glimpse of him, it almost straight down. He saw a good-looking, powerfully-built man a good three inches over six feet in height, with a ruddy face, a square, stubborn chin and a mouth like a saber wound. He lowered the glasses and scowled at Chadjowski.

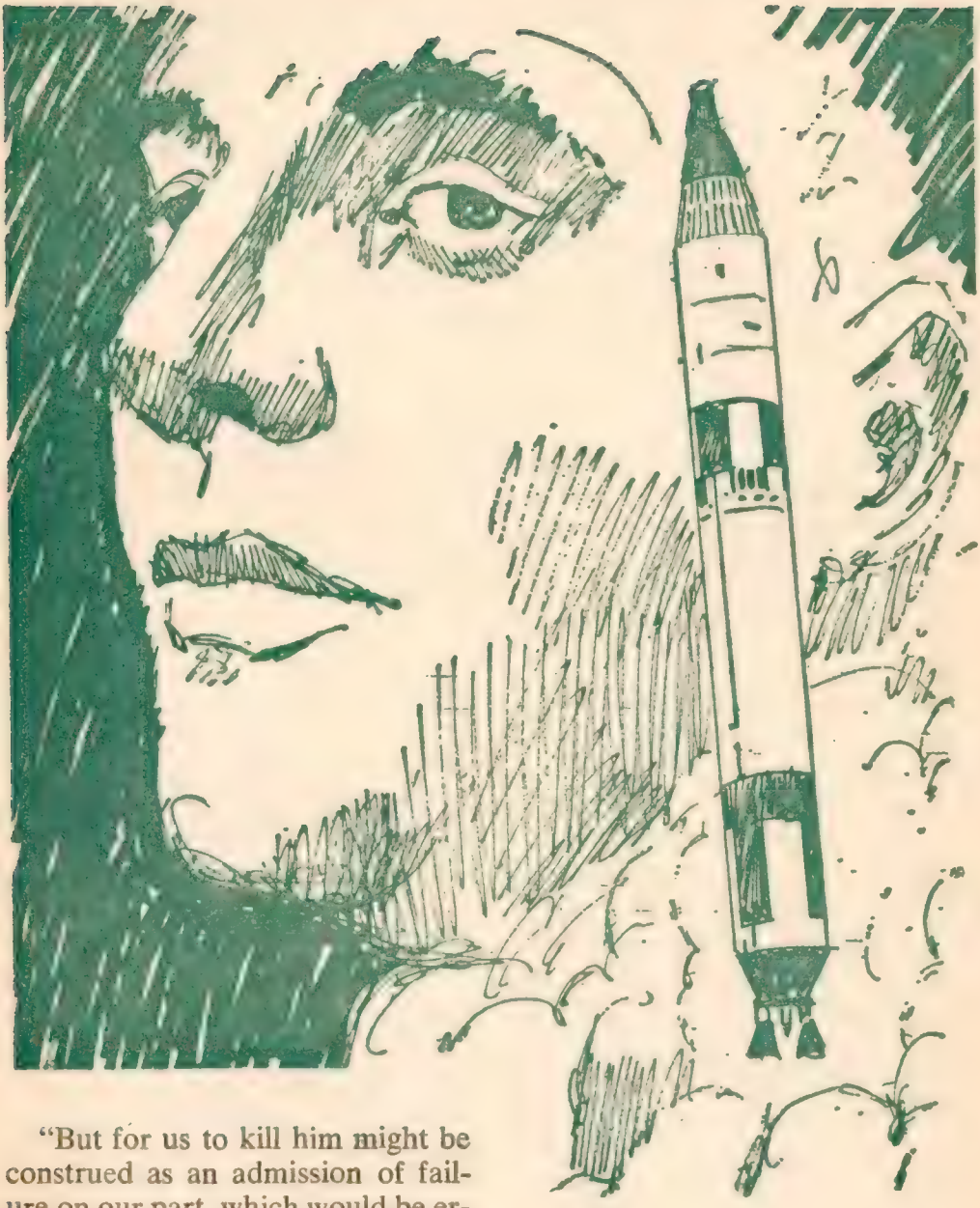
"Still feel up to it, doctor?" he said.

"Oh yes, but it would be neater to kill him," Chadjowski said in his grotesque accent. "I can bring from the laboratory ampoules of several poisons, none larger than a navy bean, in forty minutes."

"If you can't take orders, we will have to make other arrangements, doctor."

"Oh, I can take orders! But he will kill himself anyway, Mr. Sharp."

"That will not disturb us. In fact, we rather count on it." Sharp said coldly, impatient because he had let himself be baited into explaining. "The point is, it must be impressed on them that Colonel Vivorov has failed from the first. If he now kills himself, no doubt with one of the poisons provided for him, that's one thing.



"But for us to kill him might be construed as an admission of failure on our part, which would be erroneous, and exactly the opposite of the effect we wish to create. Remember, there must be an autopsy, and their own surgeons and biochemists must be allowed to participate. The cause of death must be unimpeachably clear."

Chadjowski thought it over. "Devilish! It would be such a

pleasure to kill him. But yes, I see your point. I thoroughly agree, you have fixed on a devilish way to throw consternation into the whole apparatus!"

"I'm glad you see," Sharp said. He looked at Noonan, who had tucked into his ear the button-sized receiver connected with the maze of microphones in the room down on the sixth floor. "Anything going on?"

"No," said Noonan. 'Sounds like he might be getting ready to take a shower. Yes, there it goes, the water in the shower. Let's give him thirty minutes."

"Sounds about right," Sharp said. "Might as well make ourselves comfortable."

He sat down and instantaneously was relaxed, a smallish man with the face of a browbeaten, henpecked shoe clerk, a ready-made brown suit, and a fantastic record as one of the best counter-intelligence agents in the world.

Noonan, the Russian-language expert who had read more Russian literature and newspapers than most Russians, was a tall, nervous man with a gloomy expression. He sat beside the open window with his elbows on his knees, his long face frozen in a spasm of concentration as he listened to the sounds from the gadget in his ear.

The third man, Chadjowski, sat down on the edge of the bed as lightly as a kitten, notwithstanding his two hundred and thirty-two pounds. Physically he looked relaxed too, but the other two had never learned to read his expression very well. In some ways, he was as much of an enigma to them as he had been five years ago.

And five years ago, Dr. Maxim Chadjowski had been one of the most puzzling individuals in the Soviet espionage apparatus in America. He was obviously not a military man. He had no family in Russia, no sweetheart; he pursuued neither girls nor boys here. There was no dossier on him, and for a year and a half he had baffled them.

Not luck, but painstaking work had finally identified him. Dr. Chadjowski was a chemist and an expert in the field of synthetic fibers. They began feeding him tidbits about American science, and at last they found the things that pleased his appetite. It was a process of elimination, that was all.

What it proved was that Chadjowski's job was to find out all he could about solid propellants for U.S. rockets. Once they knew that, the rest was easy. For two years, they fed him a perfectly-balanced diet of good and bad information. There was enough good to keep him hooked, and enough bad to make the total valueless.

There was reason to believe that this information had been responsible for one or two conspicuous Soviet rocket failures. There was reason, finally, to believe that the

Russians had tumbled to the fact that their prize spy in the solid-propellant field had been a patsy.

At this point, D. H. Sharp and his crew had moved in on Dr. Chadjowski. It was not hard to convince a man of his intelligence that he had been had, but good. Neither was it particularly difficult to persuade him that it was better to go underground here—figuratively—than to return to the Soviet Union and do so quite literally.

The information Chadjowski turned over to U.S. authorities when he defected was valuable. He could have held back a lot of it, and the fact that he came over so completely testified to his sincerity.

But Sharp had never quite understood him, had never felt quite at ease around him. Dr. Maxim Chadjowski changed his politics without changing his personality. He remained peculiarly and inextinguishably Russian, even as he worked—nay, slaved was a better word—for American chemistry.

As for his work, it was good, but not as good as they had expected it to be. He was brilliant but erratic. His theoretical knowledge was broad rather than deep. He had a tendency to become intoxicated by scientific oddities, to pursue them fanatically while neglecting his assigned work.

For instance, Chadjowski had developed at least a dozen exotic poisons, all of which probably had their uses, but which simply were not his job. He had read everything there was to read on toxicology in three languages—English, Russian and German.

He was probably, Sharp thought, the world's greatest expert on poisons and their effect on living tissue. It was comforting to think that if Dr. Maxim Chadjowski was typical of Soviet rocket-fuel researchers, the morning line on the big moon-race might not be so discouraging after all.

The longer the three men waited, the less Sharp liked the idea of sending Chadjowski down to confront Colonel Vivorov. It had been his own idea, and it was still sound in theory.

The idea was to shock Vivorov into something impetuous—suicide, preferably.

If Chadjowski functioned as he was supposed to function, the whole apparatus built around Vivorov would receive a paralyzing blow. But this planning, it seemed to Sharp, overlooked something stubborn, cross-grained, deeply mystical and intrinsically Russian about the chemist.

"He's out of the shower," Noonan said. "There the phone just rang! Let's see. . . . It's room service. His gray suit has been pressed. . . . He said to send it up; he has been waiting for it."

Sharp made a quick decision. "We'll wait until the suit is delivered. Then we'll give him ten min-

utes to get dressed. Then, doctor, you go down."

'Without poison," Chadjowski said disappointedly.

"Damn it, keep your mind on what's important!" Sharp snarled.

"Very well," Chadjowski sighed, "but I envy you native Americans. I wish I could be as satisfied as you by an objective victory! But you cannot imagine what it is like, I guess. One cannot be a Russian and be impersonal.

"You see, to Colonel Vivorov and to me the State is not an ideal. The State is the man who commands you. The State is an individual who promotes or demotes you, who rewards or disgraces you, who permits you to live or consigns you to infamy and death. And to me, sir, the State I have abandoned is, at this moment, Colonel Vivorov."

"Well, now you're an American," Sharp growled.

"True," Chadjowski sighed. "But the State we are trying to impress is Russian, is it not? I have nothing against Vivorov personally. No doubt he is a jolly fellow! Yet to the Russian mind, nothing makes the impression of death, nothing is so convincing, so—"

"There's the suit being delivered," Noonan said.

"We'll wait ten minutes," Sharp said, looking first at his watch and then, doubtfully, at Chadjowski.

Not a word was said as the ten minutes passed. Sharp gave the sign and he and Chadjowski stood up. Noonan remained seated, listening. Sharp put his hand on the big chemist's shoulder.

"You have it all memorized, I'm sure," he said.

"Yes."

"The facts alone are convincing, but they must be multiplied in impact by the emotional turmoil of recognizing you. You are, in essence, about to destroy a personality. Vivorov believes he has been uniformly successful. When he learns he has been uniformly a dupe and a fool, the man he is at this moment will exist no more."

"I understand all that!"

'Then for God's sake, pull it off! Vivorov is a tough nut. He is also an egotist. You need a certain style. If you succeed with your opening line, you—"

"Please, Mr. Sharp! I am a tough nut too. Also, I am by blood, intellect and culture, a Russian. Believe me, I understand this man better than you do."

There was nothing to do but let him go. They locked the door behind him, and then Noonan flipped the switch for the loudspeakers and put away his earpiece. For a while, nothing but the hum of audio circuits came from the surveillance set in the room on the sixth floor. Colonel Vivorov apparently was a quiet dresser.

And then, right on time, came those seven soft, measured raps on the door. They heard someone

make sure the safety chain was hooked. Then came the colonel's voice, in his perfect Oxonian English.

"Yes? Who is it, please?"

Muffled by the door, but not much, came the voice of Chadjowski, in that vaudeville accent of his: "Colonel Vivorov, it is later than you think. We haven't much time. If you will be so kind as to admit me!"

Colonel Vivorov said, "What's this, what do you mean, it is later than I think? Please do not annoy me."

Chadjowski said several words in Russian. Their translation was, "The market is declining and more margin is needed." The sensitive microphones in the room picked up Vivorov's sharp, startled intake of breath.

The words were a password, one issued so lately that Vivorov thought that only he and two other men in the United States knew it. And neither of the other two men spoke in that ridiculous accent.

There was a smooth click as the door was unlocked and opened to the length of the safety chain. Vivorov said, "What nonsense is this? Who are you, sir?"

Sharp and Noonan could not help tensing. So much depended on Chadjowski now!

He did not let them down. 'Oh, please, Colonel!" Chadjowski said. "We have been so close, you and I! I am the man who has been furnishing you with solid-propellant data. I am the man who helped you blow up Venus Probe Six and Submarine five hundred thirty-one, the *Hegel*. I am a chemist by profession, called Maxim Chadjowski."

In utter silence, a world was destroyed. Sharp could picture Vivorov standing there in his newly-pressed gray suit, beautifully dressed for burial except that he had yet to lie down. What horrors must be running through that cold and calculating mind now!

Official news, especially bad news, was not freely circulated in Vivorov's country, even among high officials. Yet surely he had heard of Venus Six blowing up on the launching pad with six men aboard; because if the information Sharp had was correct, the investigation as to the cause of the explo-

sion was still being pushed vigorously.

No doubt Vivorov had been interrogated about it himself, since part of Venus Six's development was based on technical data supplied by him. But Chadjowski had assured them all that Vivorov would be cleared. The lab tests would be favorable. You had to get the stuff in a mass, with a Russian ignition system, to blow it up prematurely.

No doubt Vivorov had heard about the loss of the *Hegel* with the first production-model ICBM missiles for undersea firing, although this disaster had occurred quite recently. These missiles used an altogether different propellant. It would be hard to connect this explosion with the Venus Six one—except that Colonel Vivorov had supplied some of the technical data for it, too.

Perhaps Vivorov had been wondering, in the back of his mind, if there might not be a connection between the two, and how soon the same thought might occur to others in the solid-fuel program. But he had no reason to feel any personal responsibility. He had supplied them with so many, many technical secrets that did work!

But more important than obtaining technical secrets, for a man in Colonel Vivorov's position, was the always-present and never forgotten duty to seek information on the fate of the renegade Dr. Maxim Chadjowski. Put the three things together—Venus Six, the *Hegel*, and Chadjowski—and you could come to only one catastrophic conclusion.

"What are you talking about?" Vivorov said hoarsely, in English.

"Oh please, my dear colonel, let me come in!" Chadjowski replied. "Surely you don't want me to stand out here in the hall and carry on my end of the conversation where every passing housemaid can hear me!"

"Come in."

There was the sound of the chain dropping. Dr. Chadjowski's footsteps would be muffled by the fine carpets; then they heard the door close and the chain being hooked again. A lock snapped.

"Look at me carefully," Chadjowski said. "You are not to waste our time persuading yourself that I am indeed Chadjowski."

"What do you want?"

"Nothing."

A long silence, during which, Sharp imagined, Vivorov would be pacing the carpeted room warily and not very steadily. Lucky for him, Sharp thought, if he doesn't fall on his face.

So far, Chadjowski was functioning perfectly. His job was to ruin a man, destroy his personality, in the fewest moments and in the most brutal way possible.

"Nothing?" Vivorov said, at last.

"No," Chadjowski said. "What

can you do for me? Ours is a difficult profession, my dear colonel. As the American say, here today and gone tomorrow!"

"Why did you come here?"

"To tell you that you are through."

"Am I to be arrested?"

"Arrested? What a preposterous suggestion!" The chemist's accent became thicker than ever. "Why should anyone want to arrest you? My dear colonel, your papers are in perfect order! You are free to embark whenever you can persuade the ambassador that you should do so."

"The ambassador. My God!"

"Exactly."

Another silence, with something objectively piteous in it. It, was difficult if not impossible to feel sorry for Colonel Vivorov personally, but the horns of his dilemma were so sharp that they symbolized the plight of all mankind.

"You really are Maxim Chadjowski?"

"Really, Colonel!"

"I'll ask for asylum. I'll ask them to take me in and hide me."

"The Americans? You must be mad! In the first place, even though it is their tradition to grant asylum, they are not obligated to hide a man wih your record. I was a different case, sir. I am a scientist, something to contribute to society.

"But you? What have you to offer? You'd turn the apparatus inside out for them? My dear colonel, I'm afraid they already know more about it than you do. And then, don't forget, there is that little matter of the murder in the Western Zone of Berlin. Once you divest yourself of diplomatic immunity, they will have to turn you over to the Germans for prosecution."

Suddenly the colonel shifted to Russian. Noonan translated swiftly for Sharp.

"Chadjowski, what can I do?"

"I don't understand you."

"Don't try to make a fool of me. Don't torture me! I—I feel as though I am losing my mind. I must have time to think—"

"Think about what? The Americans have a saying for this, too. You are between a rock and a hard place. A man of your intelligence —now please don't clutch at me, Colonel! I'm afraid I'm going to pieces myself if you persist in displaying all this unruly emotion."

"Chadjowski, you know what it's like. You have suffered too—tell me what I can do!"

"Why," said Chadjowski, "you can give me a drink."

At this, D. H. Sharp half rose out of his chair and exclaimed, "That fool! He can't follow the simplest orders, he has to improvise, dramatize—"

"A drink," Vivorov said dully. "Yes, to be sure. I'm sorry, Chadjowski. I should have offered you a drink before. I need one myself. My God, what a predicament!"

"Not that stuff, if you please.

The old stone flask brings back haunting memories, but I would rather not."

"It's good Russian vodka. The best. What will you have then, doctor?"

"Why, vodka, of course. But not that Russian stuff."

"And what's wrong with Russian vodka?"

"Oh, my dear colonel!" Chadjowski laughed. "I am a chemist, please remember. I drink only American vodka. That was true even before I—changed my opinions about politics, shall we say?"

"American vodka! What a fraud it is! Yet if you really prefer the stuff, I can order some for you."

"If you would be so kind."

At this point, D. H. Sharp got up and began pacing the room.

"If he's going to do what I think he's going to do," he muttered, "I'll personally kill him when he gets out of there."

"What is he up to?" said Noonan.

"He's still a Russian!" Sharp said furiously. "The old Russian stunt. Stalin himself used it every time he could get away with it. Glass for glass, until someone's chin hits the table. I'll kill him for this!"

Colonel Vivorov shifted back to English to order American vodka by phone. The two men chatted idly until the vodka was delivered. The colonel seemed to be in a trance state, not yet able to *feel* the truth that his mind had already grasped. It was like listening to a man comment on the fine weather, on his way to the gallows.

The vodka arrived.

"I don't see how you can drink that stuff," Vivorov said. "It is as flavorless as medicine."

"That is because it is pure," Chadjowski said.

"There is nothing purer than good Russian vodka!"

Chadjowski laughed indulgently. "That is an illusion in which a chemist cannot indulge himself. Flavor does not come from the vodka, but from the congeners."

"The what?"

"The non-potable alcohols and aldehydes that are byproducts of all fermentation."

"Well, I don't know anything about congeners," the colonel said, "but give me good vodka distilled from the old potato mash, from a stone bottle, and I ask nothing better."

"That is because you are not a chemist, colonel. Most of the flavors in the world's famous potables come from the congeners. Take whisky, for instance. It's not the alcohol in the whisky, but the flavor-giving congeners, that give it the hangover potential. It's a matter of culture. Your health sir."

"Health!"

One of the two drinkers gurgled loudly; Sharp thought it was probably the colonel.

"There is also fusel oil," said Chadjowski.

"Huh?"

"It is one of the congeners. Dreadful stuff, yet it is what gives the traditional rare flavor to the richer whiskies and brandies."

"I don't know about that. Another drink?"

"If you will drink with me, my dear colonel."

"Your health, Chemist Chadjowski!"

"And to you, health and a long life, Comrade Colonel Vivorov. But what am I saying? A long life seems rather out of the question to you, I should say."

Another long, nervous gurgle.

"Another drink, Chemist Chadjowski?"

"Only if you are taking another one, Comrade Colonel Vivorov."

"Of course I am!"

"Won't you try the American kind?"

"Have tried it. Don't like it! No flavor."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. The potato-mash flavor of fine Russian vodka comes from the congeners left in it by imperfect distillation. Now, I can drink this American vodka all day, and never have a head the next morn ing."

"You're a traitor and a turncoat, chemist. I can drink you under the table!"

"I should like to see you try."

"Your health!"

"May you live to eat the chicken that scratches on your grave. That is an Irish saying, colonel."

"What's an Irish saying?"

"That about the chicken."

"Who was talking about chickens? Why are you torturing me this way, comrade chemist? I feel that I am going to weep."

"You need another drink."

"You too. I will drink you under the table!"

"If you insist. Here's mud in your eye!"

"Must you insult a doomed man, chemist?"

"That is not an insult. It is an American toast, and I drink it to you in pure American vodka."

"What was it you said about chickens a minute ago? Comrade Chemist, I am a tragic man. Life no longer has any value to me. I feel betrayed."

"You need another drink," Chadjowski said thickly.

An hour later, D. H. Sharp made up his mind.

"I should never have trusted him," he said, "but I needed him for the shock value. You stay on the listening post, Noonan. I've got to go down and break that up."

It took him only a few moments to reach the door of the room on the sixth floor, but then the two Russians inside ignored his pounding. He had to return to his own room and phone for a man with a pass key, and then he had to send

out for bolt-cutters to cut the safety chain.

By the time he got in the room, Colonel Fedor Vivorov was flat on his back in the middle of the carpet, and Chadjowski was barely clinging to his seat. Sharp knelt beside the colonel and made a quick examination.

"Dead," he said.

Chadjowski nodded owlishly. "Yes. He came in second. What a disgraceful way for a Russian agent to die! The apparatus will be demoralized."

"Chadjowski, if you poisoned him—!"

I did nothing of the sort!" the chemist said indignantly. "Their own autopsy will confirm that he died of alcoholic poisoning, a familiar postmorten finding in his country. But what is important is that I stayed with him, glass for glass. That will impress those people tremendously!"

"There's something fishy about this, Chadjowski."

"Not at all! Congeners are impurities. They are present in all alcoholic beverages except American vodka. Taken in sufficient quantities, they are poisonous. The post mortem finding of alcoholic poisoning is quite often erroneous. Death actually occurs as a result of toxemia by aldehydes and fusel oil."

Sharp picked up the phone, called the desk, and asked that the homicide bureau at police headquarters be notified. Then he placed an emergency call to a number in Washington, so the embassy could be tipped in time to exert its extra-territorial sovereignty over the colonel's body.

When he turned around, Chadjowski was just sliding out of his chair to a more comfortable prone position on the floor. Sharp dropped to his knee and groped for the chemist's thick wrist, but before he could find the pulse, Chadjowski opened one eye.

"I told you my way was better!" he said softly.

Three hours later, Sharp and Noonan got at last to dinner. Chadjowski had been safely put away again, to sleep it off where vengeful agents could never find him. Four uniformed policemen stood guard at the door of the death room, until the embassy attaches, alerted by the very whisper of Chadjowski's name, could come to claim the body of the late colonel.

It had been a rough day. Sharp ordered a thick steak, rare, and Noonan asked for a lobster.

"Yes sir," said the waiter. "And while we're waiting on the cook—your usual Martini, sir?"

"I can hardly wait," Sharp said. "Only this time, let's make it with vodka. Uh—American, that is."

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SHORT FUSED

by
ROBERT
EDMOND
ALTER

●

When you're sending a cargo of sudden death—don't rely on a fool to get it there!

●

BENNY SAT up on the rusty iron cot his friends had given him and reached for the transistor radio which stood on the up-ended apple box next to the ashtray.

He didn't like longhair music at all. No tune to it, that he could hear. Just noise. Thumbing the plastic selector dial on the plastic case, which had *Made In Japan* stamped on the back, he got some hip music which he could understand, or at least appreciate.

He laid back on the rumpled cot and looked up at the cobwebby ceiling overhead, and wondered when his friends were going to give him some more whisky.

Johnny, one of his three friends, walked across the loft.

"Aw, Benny," Johnny said in a querulous voice, "now you're getting your new pants all wrinkly. Can't you keep yourself neat for just five minutes? Give you half an hour and you'd look like a bum again!"

Benny slid his bulky feet to the floor and sat up quickly, unable to meet Johnny's irritated gaze. He looked down at his new, slightly wrinkled suit pants with a deep sense of mortification. His friends had done so much for him, and here he had gone and disappointed them.

It seemed that he was always disappointing them, somehow—at least Johnny. Nick and George, his other two friends, were more tolerant about his little faults.

"Stand up and see if I can't straighten you out," Johnny said. "Give you five minutes and you'd look like you did when we pulled you out of the gutter."

Humbly, Benny stood up like a shambling trained bear.

"Leave him be, Johnny," Nick said from the work table across the room. "Benny's got a big job to do today."

"The security guards will boot him out before he gets through the front door, if he comes in there like a Bowery bum," Johnny complained.

Benny wasn't hearing his friend Johnny. He was repeating his friend Nick's words in his one-gear mind. *Benny's got a big job to do today.*

Now that the time had actually arrived, Benny sensed a vague realization that he didn't really want to do the Big Job. Until this morning the Big Job had only been something intangible that belonged to the dim future; next month, next week, tomorrow . . .

And now the time was today.

If he could only find some reason, some excuse, to say to Nick, "Nick, I don't think maybe I better do it," and then go back to his army cot and his transistor and wait for his whisky. Then maybe this odd unrecognizable heaviness would get off his chest.

But some instinct of animal-like cunning warned him that if he said such a thing to Nick, then there wouldn't be any more army cot or transistor or whisky or food for him in the loft. Maybe they would even take away his nice new suit.

Anyhow, they weren't asking much of him. Not really much, considering all that they had done for him. He had been a nobody his whole life, until his friends took him under their protective wing, hadn't he? He had been an orphan and had always failed in the orphanage school and all the kids had called him Dummy, hadn't they?

He blinked his small opaque eyes and moisture threatened to dribble down his cheeks. He snuffled his damp nose with the back of his wrist.

"Not on your pants!" Johnny yelped, outraged. "Don't wipe your hand on your pants. What do you think we bought you the handkerchief for?"

He hadn't even succeeded as a hobo, had been thrown in jail in Virginia for vagrancy. And slowly and inexorably he had degenerated down to the skid row status, where it seemed nobody had wanted to give him a job or a drink or a handout, or cared whether he lived or died.

Until his three friends found him.

Yes, they had done a great deal for him, and all because they liked him; the first people who ever had. They had cleaned him up and dressed him properly, fed him regular and let him live with them in this nice big rat-haunted loft over the abandoned dockside warehouse.

Surely this little thing they now

wanted from him in return was not much to ask. All he had to do was get on the subway and go to the building his friends had designated —the one with all the pretty flags on it—, walk into the men's room and pull the pin on the bomb and leave it there.

"Come here, Benny," Nick called from the table. "It's just about time."

Nick, who was an explosives expert, had constructed the bomb by hand in the loft. It was fashioned on the pineapple design, having a cotter pin to secure the spring-actuated lever, which was shaped to follow the contour of the bomb's casing. The pin was pulled, the spring lever flew off, causing a striker to ignite the primer. Ignition was transmitted through a delay fuse. He had loaded the bomb with a powerful nitro-gelatin compound which guaranteed a most appalling percussion.

Because Johnny had fretted that Benny would likely get to playing with the bomb on the subway, Nick had devised a double safety for the bomb.

He held the lemon-sized bomb up for Benny's inspection.

"All right, Benny," he said with a patronizing smile, "we'll go through it again. If for any reason —" he spaced each word slowly and carefully, "—the pin should come out of the bomb *before* you reach the building with the flags, and the lever should come off, you put the pin back in this little hole here, see?"

"Slower," Benny's third friend, George, murmured. "He can't follow but three words at a time."

"I understand all right, George," Benny said quickly, proud of himself. "I put the pin back in." Then he stopped and looked lost.

"What's that do, Nick?" he wondered.

"I've told you, Benny. It breaks the action of the trigger. It disarms the activating—"

"He can't follow that," Johnny said.

"It will keep the bomb from exploding," Nick amended. "But you won't have to worry about that, because *you won't* pull the pin and let the lever fly off *until* you place the bomb in the men's room. Will you, Benny?"

Benny shook his head. "No, Nick.

"Good boy," Nick said. "See?" he said to the others, "Benny understands. Now, Benny, what do you do after you leave here?"

Benny wet his lips, his oversized sausage-fingered hands started to flap helplessly at his sides, trying desperately to remember, to backtrack through the endless, foggy hours of instruction and rehearsal. Then he remembered.

"I—uh, take the subway," he said hopefully.

"Which subway?"

"Uh—the one up Fourth, and—uh, I transfer at the Forty-Second

Terminal and go to the building with all the flags in front." His awkward hands were steady now. He was picking up confidence, remembering.

"And I go into the middle building and I take out the bomb and pull the—"

"No!" Johnny cried. "No no no! *Not* when you get into the lobby, you fool. You'll have twenty security guards right down your throat! *You go to the men's room.* The men's room, damn it!

Benny nodded anxiously. "Yeah. I take it to the men's room."

"This is really bad," Johnny said in an urgent undertone to Nick. "Why can't we let him take a taxi? Then he wouldn't have all that transfer nonsense on his mind to cloud the rest of it."

"No," Nick said. "A taxi might get tied up in traffic. Or it might not. Which would get him there ahead of time. I want him there at one exactly. Which is when all those Balkan delegates are due to arrive. This is going to be a beautiful world-wide outrage, not a mere incident."

George leaned forward in his chair, frowning.

"I'm worried about this rest room bit, Nick," he said quietly. "What if he gets the wrong one? It would create an ungodly havoc. He can't read, you know."

Nick didn't look at George. He smiled at Benny.

"Benny knows which room to go to, don't you, Benny? Because we've been through it many many times. Which one is it, Benny?"

Benny's thick helpless hands began to twitch at his sides. He wasn't so dumb as they thought; it was just that he needed time to frame a correct answer to a direct question.

"The—the one on the right, Nick. Like you said."

"Good boy! Then what do you do?"

"I go in and I see there aren't many people in there and I go to the sink like I wanted to wash my hands and—uh—and I pull the pin and put the bomb in the sink."

"Exactly! And then you just walk right on out of the men's room and out of the building and get on the subway and come back here again. Right?"

"Right." Benny wet his lips, thinking about it. "Nick, I won't get hurt, huh? I mean, the—the bomb —"

Nick smiled a fatherly smile.

"I've set the timing for five minutes. You know that, Benny. It's a time bomb. You'll be a block away before it explodes."

Benny's intellect was not geared high enough to register a working conscience. It never entered his mind to be remotely concerned over all the killed and maimed his action might create. But he was endowed with an atavistic sense of animal fear.

"Nick," he said hesitantly. "I won't be caught, huh?"

Nick, the very best of his three friends, chuckled.

"Not a chance, Benny. Believe me. You'll be getting even with all the people who have held you down all your life, who have kicked you and insulted you and never given you a break. And they won't be able to pin a thing on you, because you won't be there."

He meant it. The bomb he was giving Benny was a time bomb all right—with a seven-second fuse. It was going to go off before the moron reached the door and it was going to make scraps of him. And that was all the investigators would have to work with, the pulpy bits of an unknown skidrow derelict. No identification.

And then there was the master touch . . .

Nick picked up a newspaper and showed it to Benny. It was a paper printed and distributed by a radical group. Pieces of it would be found on the dismembered Benny and it would appear that the radicals had perpetrated the ghastly outrage.

"You put this in your left-hand coatpocket, Benny. The bomb will be in your right coat pocket and it will balance the look of you."

Benny thought he understood that. He nodded. But when Johnny helped him into his expensive new overcoat, he started to put the newspaper in his right pocket.

Johnny groaned. "How's he supposed to know which is the right restroom when he don't know right from left?"

Benny quickly switched the newspaper over to his left pocket.

"Don't rattle him," Nick said in a soft, tense voice. "He's doing all right. He'll get it."

"I got it," Benny said. "I got it, Johnny. You don't have to worry." And at that moment he was even eager to go get it done. Because now, after thirty-five years of a bumbling existence, he was finally going to get even with the people who had always kept him down. Nick said so, and that had to make it true.

The heaviness was finally off his chest. He had no more personal doubts or animal fears. He accepted the bomb as a child would accept a birthday gift, and placed it in his overcoat pocket.

Today he was going to strike back at a blind, uncaring society that had never tried to understand him. He felt very good about it. He was going to hurt people as he thought they had always hurt him.

He smiled at his three friends and started for the door.

Nick was a chair-ridden invalid. He had to remain at the table. George stayed put because he was a pessimist at heart, and now, at this vital moment, he felt very morose. Only Johnny tagged after Benny.

Just as he reached the door the thirty-five years of living in a perverse world caught up with Benny and he stopped with a stricken look and started to wag his big clumsy hands.

"What if something goes wrong, Johnny? What'll I do if something should go wrong?"

Johnny laughed and slapped him on the back.

"Just put the pin back in and come home to papa," he said. He actually laughed as he shoved Benny out the door.

BENNY PUT his coins in the turnstile and went through it to the loading dock. In a few minutes the subway came droning along the subterranean tunnel like some great mole destined for life to follow a single passageway without a mate.

Benny squeezed into the car with a mass of ill-tempered passengers, and had to chuckle to himself that not one of them knew what he was holding in his overcoat pocket. His thumb stroked the O-shape of the cotter pin.

The mole-like subway rattled on into the flickering orange-and-black netherworld, and Benny listened to the conductor's voice call off the stops. *Reade . . . Spring . . . Bleecker . . . Fourteenth street . . . Twenty-third . . . Thirty-thir . . . Forty-second.*

He got off. He was really quite pleased with himself. Everything was going as Nick had said it would. There was no hitch. This was the happiest day in his miserable life.

He walked into the building with all the colorful flags, bolstered by the confidence instilled in him by his three friends and his new clothes.

Hundreds of busy people were milling around and talking. Men, women and children, and uniforms too. Benny liked uniforms and he paused to admire a soldierly man who looked as if he had just stepped from a picture book or a color movie.

And there were young girls, all sizes and shades. Benny really liked young girls, but for some reason they never liked him. Once in a bar one of them had said to him. "My gawd, don't you ever wash? You stink!" Said it right out loud, too, and everybody had laughed. Well, he'd show her. Show all of these girls.

Then, for a panicky moment, he couldn't remember why he was there. The pageantry of the big lobby had switched his one-track mind onto a siding. He turned with

a beseeching look toward a bearded man standing nearby, but caught himself in time.

The bomb in his pocket. The men's room. Sure. He wasn't so dumb. He walked toward the wall and looked at the two doors side by side.

The bomb was on his right side. Sure, that was the right door.

Beaming, he went to the door to the men's room. A sign was hanging on the doorknob but his three friends hadn't told him about it so it couldn't matter. The words *Temporarily Closed* on the sign meant nothing to him. It was the right door and that was all that counted. He opened it and stepped inside.

Nobody was there that he could see. He shuffled over to the nearest sink and drew the little bomb from his pocket and pulled out the pin. The truth was, he was actually afraid of the explosive contraption, no matter what Nick and the others said, because he had seen so many of them go off in war movies.

But Nick had promised that nothing could happen as long as he held down the spring lever, and Nick was the smartest man in the world. Benny squeezed the lever and the bomb in his big fumbly hand and lowered it carefully into the bowl of the sink.

"What're you doing in here, Jack?"

The voice hit him like a scream and, startled witless, Benny whirled around, the bomb clutched behind his back, and faced a young handyman who had just stepped out of the utility closet. The man gave him a fixed, tight look.

"Can't you read, Jack?" he wanted to know. "That sign outside says *Closed*. So why barge in and give me trouble, man?"

Benny's left hand started to wag as his dry mouth fumbled with the blocky words that hadn't had time to mature in his brain.

"Well—mister, I hafta—"

"Have to what, Jack?" the man snapped. "Have to wash your hands? Is that what's so vital to you? So do it, man. Wash 'em white and clean. And then blow, huh? Let's not ask the UN to vote on it. Dig? Let's get 'em washed. Okay?"

No. Benny knew it wasn't okay, because he knew he couldn't wash his hands while he was holding the bomb in one of them. He didn't know what to do because his three friends hadn't told him that this colored man would suddenly jump on him and fire words at him and get him all confused.

He turned sideways a little, trying to ram his hand and the bomb back into his coat pocket. The man's eyes narrowed.

"What's that in your hand, Jack? What're you trying to hide?"

"N—nothing," Benny managed to say in a totally rattled fright. He edged along the wall for the door. He fumbled for the doorknob with his left hand, his right clenching the

bomb and its lever in his pocket, got the door open and bumbled through it. He didn't pay any attention to the man's sudden call.

"Hey, man! You leave this thing on the sink?"

Benny trotted across the lobby and out the main door in a hysteria of haste. His worst fear was the vague suspicion that *he* had somehow been to blame for the mishap in the restroom. But he couldn't honestly see how that could be. He had followed Nick's instructions to the letter, right up to the moment when the man had started to yell at him.

Why hadn't his three friends told him about the man and what to say to all his questions about signs and washing his hands? No, it wasn't his fault. He hadn't done anything wrong. He would tell his friends so. Then maybe they would be nice and say, "Okay, Benny, we know it wasn't your fault," and let him have his whisky.

Yeah—but would Johnny? Johnny was always so impatient with him, always ready to blame him for something he hadn't done, or hadn't realized he'd done. But Nick would understand. Nick was his very best friend and *he* would say, "Okay, Benny, you can have your whisky." Benny tried to console himself with that hope.

He sat in the subway clutching the hair-triggered bomb in his pocket, with a hundred weary and harassed and unsuspecting transients packed around him. And he mumbled arguments and consolations to himself, until finally the fat old lady sitting beside him began to doubt his sanity and his intentions, and got up and gave her seat to a tight-sweatered young girl.

But Benny's mind was now too clogged with anxiety to notice who or what was sitting next to him. Dimly, he had come to the appalling conclusion that the failure was more than a matter of whisky. It might just mean the end of the only friendship he had ever known. Maybe even Nick wouldn't understand.

He nearly ran from the subway. Then he did run, all the way to the abandoned warehouse on the docks, and up the splintered, webby steps to the locked door. He pounded on it frantically.

Johnny let him in, barely giving him room to slip through the door before he shut it and locked it again. Benny stopped with his back to the door and looked sheepishly across the loft.

Nick and George were still at the table and they were listening to the afternoon news on the transistor. Nick looked at Benny.

"There hasn't been any special bulletin about the explosion, Benny," he said. "You didn't do anything wrong, did you?"

Benny lowered his head and licked at his slobby lips. He could feel Johnny's intense eyes.

"I—uh there was a man and he said it was closed after I got in and I—I should ought to wash my hands but I couldn't because I was holding the bomb and I—"

Johnny's eyes grew wider and wider in his peaked face until they looked like two brown-spotted white marbles.

"What did you *do* with it?"

Benny was on firm ground there. He drew the bomb from his coat.

"Just what you told me to, Johnny, if something went wrong. I brung it back, like you said. See, here it is."

Humbly, mutely, Benny placed the bomb in Johnny's open hand. The spring lever flew off with a *twannng!* And Johnny gawked at the activated bomb he was holding in his narrow palm.

George saw the lever spin in the air and he shot up and turned in a panic toward the nearest exit—the dust-glazed window—and halted in indecision when he remembered that the loft was over eighty-feet above the dock.

Nick also saw the spoon-shaped lever spring free, and he lost his head and started spinning the wheels on his chair in a frantic haste to get somewhere, anywhere, away from that seven-second bomb. Blindly, he collided feet-first into the nearest wall.

Johnny, holding the second-consuming bomb in his outstretched hand, screamed at Benny.

"The pin! Gee-sus, what did you do with the pin?"

Benny began to flap his huge hands helplessly. He really was ashamed now. This was truly his fault and he had to admit it.

"Uh—I guess I forgot it, Johnny. I guess I left it on that sink. I'm sorry, Joh—!

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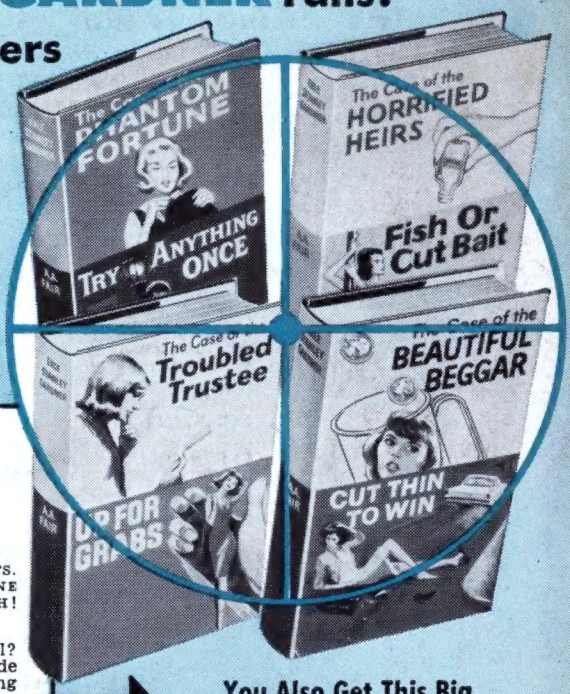
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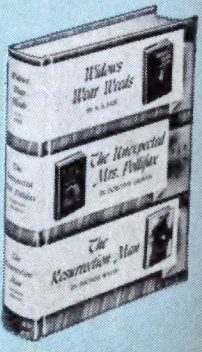

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